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**Between patriarchal Islam and Islamophobia: a  
comparison between the emancipation models of Muslim  
women in Morocco and in France**

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Dissertation submitted as partial requirement for the conferral of the  
Master in International Studies

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ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

September 2019

## **Acknowledgments**

First of all, I would like to thank Giulia Daniele, who, as a professor, revealed in me a keen interest in the Middle East problematics through her passionate teachings. I would also like to thank her, as my thesis advisor, for her precious support, guidance and all the many helpful advices that she provided me with during the writing of my thesis. All along this research, I have also had the chance to receive amazing encouragements from my family and friends, who managed to always comfort me during moments of doubt. Finally, I would like to thank Damien Ruelens, Réda Younes, Agathe Wahl, Aline Guebels and Rocio Rivas, for the intellectual stimulation they provided me with, which kept me focused on my work and inspired me.

## Resumo

Frequentemente apresentado como uma religião misógina, o Islão torna-se hoje vítima do extremismo e da mediação negativa, levando a que se acredite que a religião se opõe aos valores e princípios humanistas. Desde décadas, as mulheres muçulmanas têm vindo a lutar pela sua emancipação e também contra a opressão de género sentida em vários países muçulmanos. O feminismo islâmico pode parecer antagónico, no entanto, o movimento tem estado muito presente no Médio Oriente e no resto do mundo durante anos, com o objetivo de emancipar as mulheres com base numa interpretação diferente dos ensinamentos do Alcorão. Ainda assim, o feminismo islâmico não parece progredir identicamente nos estados teocráticos e nos estados seculares. A verdade é que existem vários fatores num país, como a cultura, a educação e a política, que parecem estar a impactar o modelo de emancipação das mulheres muçulmanas. Este debate parece ser extremamente desafiador por diferentes motivos. Numa primeira observação, é possível apontar a relação entre género e religião, tanto em países seculares como religiosos. Um segundo motivo prende-se com certos valores contra o feminismo que estão fortemente ancorados na política dos países muçulmanos. E como último apontamento: pelo contrário, devido a uma rejeição da própria religião em alguns países seculares como França. Esta tese tem como objetivo mostrar as relações entre género e religião no discurso feminista e, em particular, no feminismo islâmico, levando em conta o conceito de interseccionalidade. O objetivo também é demonstrar como o modelo de emancipação das mulheres muçulmanas pode diferir dependendo do seu ambiente específico, tomando os exemplos de Marrocos e França.

**Palavras-chave: Feminismo Islâmico, Feminismo, Islão, Interseccionalidade, Secularismo, Género, Religião.**

## **Abstract**

Often presented as a misogynist religion, Islam has nowadays become the victim of extremism and negative mediatisation, providing an image of the religion that is against many humanist values and principles. Since decades, Muslim women are fighting for their emancipation, and against the gender oppression they are suffering from in various Muslim countries. Islamic feminism can seem antagonistic and yet, the movement is very present in the Middle East and in the world for years, aiming to emancipate women based on a different interpretation of the Quranic teachings. However, Islamic feminism does not seem to progress identically in theocratic states and in secular states. Indeed, there are several factors in a country, such as culture, education, and politics, which seem to be impacting the emancipation model of Muslim women. This debate seems to be extremely challenging to lead for different reasons. First of all, due to the relationship between gender and religion, both in secular and religious countries. Secondly, due to certain values against feminism that are very strongly anchored in Muslim countries' politics. And thirdly, on the contrary, due to a rejection of the religion itself in certain secular countries, such as in France. This thesis aims to show the relationships between gender and religion in the feminist discourse and, in particular, within Islamic feminism, taking into account the concept of intersectionality. The objective is also to demonstrate how the emancipation model of Muslim women can differ depending on their specific environment, taking the examples of Morocco and France.

**Keywords: Islamic Feminism, Feminism, Islam, Secularism, Intersectionality, Gender, Religion**

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# Introduction

## *1.1 Why “Islamic feminism” and not just “feminism”*

For decades, women had to fight for their conditions, for their rights, and the way they are viewed and treated by society. Before feminism started to be defined as a movement, the place of women in society was already being criticized. Later on, a movement started to emerge, firstly trying to put women on the same level as men, and then trying to free women from the constraints of patriarchal societies. These were the very first objectives of feminism. The movement expanded itself throughout the world and very soon women started to realise that their needs were not all the same. Indeed, gender discrimination is not the only discrimination a woman can face in her life.

Sources of discrimination in the world are diverse and numerous, for every human being, regardless of their gender. Mainly social class, skin colour, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, and many other identities can trigger a reaction of reject and social exclusion from human beings who consider their own colour, religion, gender, social class, superior to others. Individuals, noticing differences between them, have started to think that for example one skin colour was worth more than the other, that a religion was worth more than the other, that a culture was worth more than the other, and that a gender was worth more than the other. Throughout their fights, many women who gathered for their rights realised that they were not all on the same level of the struggle towards equality to men, even though they were all women. Some women were having fewer rights than others, depending if they were black or white, depending if they were rich or poor, depending also on their culture and on the countries they live in. They were not all fighting from the same base. From this, different currents and views emerged within the feminist movement itself. As the sources of discrimination are different, the model of emancipation of women is also different. Indeed, they will not have the same responses to their discrimination if they are discriminated against for different things. In the case of Muslim women, there is this double discrimination combining religion and gender. Therefore, there is a need to determine Muslim women’s fight for equality as Islamic Feminism, and not as Feminism only. I find it very interesting to study feminism from a religious point of view, as it includes many other dimensions that are unused in the most popular feminism, Western feminism.

## *1.2 Main Research Question*

In certain Muslim countries, like Morocco, women are discriminated for their gender and this discrimination is mostly made in the name of religion, like if their oppression was justified and dictated by Islam itself, which adds a much more complicated dimension to their fight. Even in some secular countries, like France, in which any religion can be exercised freely, Islam has such a misogynist image that the discriminations are also about the religion itself. Accordingly, considered as victims, Muslim women are refused to enter<sup>1</sup> in occidental feminist associations as they are not considered feminists, but they are considered as “women who need to be saved from their oppressive religion”(Göl, 2018). In both cases, Muslim women need to fight to be considered as equal to men, and to fight for the teachings of their religion which they do not consider as being misogynist.

Islamic feminism has started to emerge 70 years ago (Sadiqi, 2016) and mainly aimed to improve the condition of Muslim women within society through a different interpretation of the Quran. The position of women in certain countries is quite archaic and religiously conservative, and it seems that Islam also became a manner of justifying and legitimating those practices. Nowadays, Islamic feminism is based on a rereading of the Quran, on a modern interpretation of it, in favour of women having the right to be equal to men. This fight for emancipation is quite difficult to manage in several Islamic countries. For example, Saudi Arabia allows much less rights to women than Morocco, which allows less right to women than France. From these different contexts, I can observe that gender discrimination is similar, but is triggered from different ideologies and values. We have on one hand, a growing Islamophobia in France, and on the other, a patriarchal interpretation of Islam which is impairing women to exercise their rights as full human beings. Since the reasons for discrimination are different, I wonder what are the differences of Muslim women’s model of emancipation in France and in Morocco?

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<sup>1</sup> Mainly by radical feminist movement for whom feminism and religion are not compatible, and for the reason that Muslim women are considered as being brainwashed by their religion.

### *1.3 Methodology*

In order to respond to my problematic, I will use a comparative research design focusing on two case studies, Morocco and France. A comparative research design will indeed help me to observe the differences in the development of Islamic feminism in different contexts, especially comparing its progress in theocratic and secular contexts, but analysing what are the limits to the rise of Islamic feminism and to the improvement of the condition of Muslim women. The dominant research strategy will be qualitative, using a constructionist ontology approach in order to observe the social phenomenon of Islamic feminism and the way it is constructed by its social actors in the different contexts. This approach is to me the most appropriate as it will allow me to verify the different responses and actions of Muslim women depending on the contexts in which they are trying to change their condition. The research will be focused on case studies from two different countries, Morocco and France, as examples of states where Islam is moderately used in politics, and Islamic feminism is present but is progressing differently. The movement in these countries will be studied from the emergence of Islamic feminism until now in order to be able to observe its development and finally adapt it to the contexts in which it has progressed. This will help me to explore the impact that Islam has had and continues to have towards the emancipation model of Islamic feminists.

### *1.4 Thesis overview and hypothesis*

It seems that the more Islam is present in politics, the more it is difficult for women to be emancipated. But again, is really Islam that is acting as a barrier to women emancipation? Or is rather the interpretation that powerful men are having of Islam? Is a question of culture more than religion? Islamic feminism also operates in secular countries and seems to be depending on the country's attachment to secularity, and to the image and relationship to the religion of Islam. Accordingly, it seems that the more negative the image of Islam is, the more complicated it is for Muslim women to make their voices heard. These are two opposite relationships to Islam: on one hand, an archaic and conservative view of the religion, and on the other hand, an evil image of it founded on hate and discrimination. In both cases, Muslim women have to fight for another view of their religion, through a reinterpretation of the Quran, but as the source of discrimination is different, how are their responses going to be?



How are they going to conduct their fight for their emancipation in these two different types of societies?

In the first part of the thesis, I will explore how controversial the definition of Islamic feminism is, pointing out the intersectional dimension within feminism and within Islamic feminism itself, as well as the categories that can be determined within the movement. In the second part, I will explain how Islamic feminism operates depending on the contexts of Morocco and France, highlighting the testimonies of Muslim feminists scholars living in the two different societies. I will finally be able to determine what are the factors that are impacting and that constitute the emancipation model of Muslim women and discriminations they are suffering from in both cases. All along this research, I will explain in depth the different relationships between religion and gender depending on the two different contexts.

# Controversial definitions of Islamic Feminism

## *2.1 The shapes of Islamic feminism*

Defining the feminist movement(s) and, in particular, Islamic feminism is very complex since a plurality of movements exists within feminism itself. Indeed, strictly defining the term would create a delimited perimeter and therefore would exclude some dimensions that could be relevant for a certain group of women, and include other dimensions that could be irrelevant for other groups of women. Providing a single and strict definition would then automatically be inaccurate since, on the one hand, it would not be true for every woman, and, on the other hand, it would include an aspect of power by interpreting firmly women's condition and what the needs arising from this condition are. As very well explained by Sara Salem (2013):

“Questions of definition and change are central to any project aiming to bring about social, political and economic change, but definition brings with it an intrinsic risk of delineating borders that include some but exclude others. In other words, the act of defining constitutes an exercise of power that creates certain women's experiences as patriarchal and others' as emancipatory.” (Salem, 2013: 2)

In that sense, giving a strict definition of feminism and Islamic feminism would not include every woman's reality and therefore exclude them from the movement. For example, Western feminism<sup>2</sup> has always intrinsically considered that religious women have no autonomous behaviour as their behaviour is dictated by religion, which represents an authority above them. Among Western feminists, it is mostly thought that they are “free” thanks to secularity and that religion is a freedom stopper as it is considered as being patriarchal by definition. As explained by Salem (2013), it creates a binary dimension to feminism and religion between “what is spiritual and what is secular”. However, this “neglects the fact that many religions movements are profoundly modern”. This is creating a debate as to considering religion as being oppressive in itself. If Western feminism considers religion as non-emancipating, then

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term Western Feminism to talk about occidental, mainstream, most popular feminism. This is mainly used in occidental countries, and it excludes religion from the emancipation movement.

it also excludes women who *choose* “to submit themselves to a higher power, and not interpreting this as a form of oppression” (Salem, 2013: 6).

This has also raised the problematic of subjectivity and individual choice: who decides whether religion should be judged as oppressive or not? Has this perspective created a certain power dimension in the sense to make religious women believing that they cannot be free if they choose to be religious? This actually judges and stops them from taking the choice of being religious. Therefore occidental feminism movements, that gave themselves the mission to “free” Muslim women from their submissive conditions, and that are claiming to make them free, actually forbid them to make their own individual choices related to religion, which means that they are not free either. Salem (2013) really sheds light on this problematic:

“At the center of this debate is the question of choice and how judgements about choices are made, and by whom. In other words, who decides that religion is oppressive to women, and what power relations are inherent in such a decision? The aim is to contextualize the consistently exclusionary approach on the part of many feminists towards religious women through focusing on the specific case of Islamic feminism, as well as to question whether intersectionality poses a possible solution to this exclusion.”  
(Salem, 2013: 2)

Through this analysis we can understand that there is a very strong difference of beliefs between Western feminism and Islamic feminism in regards to what feminism should be for religious women, and for non-religious women. If there is no universal feminism, the definitions of feminism that exist today are not exact for every feminist. These definitions are based on the general tendencies that can be observed within certain social groups of women having similar conditions, from which emerge different currents of feminism, whose fight is driven according to different manners, although it sometimes leads to the same result.

Among the authors and scholars who have studied Islamic feminism, defining the movement stays very general in order not to exclude certain women’s realities. Accordingly, Islamic feminism “has been very central and challenging male authority and interpretative privilege in Islam, and recentering women’s authority” (Salem, 2013: 6). Margot Badran (2002), one of the foremost scholars dealing with Islamic feminism, qualifies it as “a discourse and a feminist practice which is articulated inside an Islamic paradigm. Islamic Feminism, which draws its understanding and its authority from the Quran, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence.” (Badran, 2002, translated

from French). On the other hand, Saba Mahmood (2004) describes Islamic feminism in terms of “women challenging social norms as a sign of obedience to God” (Mahmood, 2004 apud Salem, 2013: 6). Furthermore, according to Azadeh Kian (2016), Islamic feminism does not agree with laws and politics concerning Muslim women without getting away from their beliefs through a reinterpretation of Islamic texts aiming to equality.

Overall, women are referring to religion with the objective to reinterpret the Quran in order to demonstrate that there is an ethic of gender equality within the religion of Islam. “Ethic of gender equality which is not equality of genders as we understand it today”(Kian, 2016, translated from French). Indeed, not being equal in every aspect of life like we could understand, but rather equality in the sense of recognising Muslim women by their values as human beings, not as women only, and welcoming the differences between men and women, accepting to have different roles in the society without any discrimination towards the gender’s worth. Azadeh Kian (2016) also highlights the fact that there are subtleties and differences of opinion within Islamic feminism itself, which is important to point out in order not to exclude certain aspects and opinions of the women constituting the movement. Other authors also insist on the importance of the spiritual and faith dimension which constitutes Islamic feminism. Indeed, this is not only about reinterpreting sacred texts in the favour of women’s rights, but having a deep faith in the emancipating message of the Quran. In Asma Lamrabet’s (2012) view:

“[...] the aim [of Islamic Feminism] will be to militate for Muslim women’s rights, from the inside of Islam as a religion, as a lifestyle, according to a globalist and contemporary vision. We fight in an explicitly religious framework, for the simple and good reason that, in our eyes, we consider that Islam is carrying a message profoundly emancipating.” (Lamrabet, 2012, translated from French).

As we can see throughout these views, definitions of Islamic feminism are quite general and broad, acknowledging the fact that there can be many differences in the movement itself considering every specific reality of Muslim women. There is no strict definition that has scientifically been made of Islamic feminism; on the other hand, there is a set of broad statements and goals that are qualifying Islamic feminism as a recognised movement, a fighting movement for Muslim women’s rights. In this sense, Margot Badran (2002) insists on the fact that several Muslim women see Islamic feminism as a project of “articulating and promoting the practice prescribed by the Quran about gender equality and social justice”.

While some others do not qualify this project as Islamic feminism, but rather as an “Islamic project aiming to an academic rereading of the sacred texts, an interpretation centred on women and their roles” (Badran, 2002, translated from French). However, all the authors that have studied the question seem to agree on the fact that Islamic Feminism is about improving (in general) Muslim women’s conditions through a reinterpretation of the Islamic texts.

## *2.2 Categories within Islamic Feminism*

Al-Sharmani (2014) explains the different interpretations that Islamic feminist scholars and activists have given about the fundamental aim of Islamic feminism and stresses the diversity of opinions on this subject, making a clear definition of it very complicated. This is the reason why the author aims to review and redefine Islamic feminism by “providing alternative descriptions of the work of Islamic feminism by focusing on the hermeneutical and epistemological contributions on this project” (Al-Sharmani, 2014: 84). Islamic feminism has two main categories and goals:

“In my view, Islamic feminism, as a knowledge project, can be classified according to two categories: transnational and national. These projects, which are predominantly undertaken by Muslim women, have two broad aims: tracing and problematizing patriarchal religious knowledge that sanctions gender inequality; and producing alternative readings that are egalitarian while at same time being based on Islamic ethical and theological principles.” (Al-Sharmani, 2014: 86)

Depending on the two categories defined above, the work of Islamic feminists can be interpreted differently: the transnational category is rather exposed by women scholars whose work focuses on gender equality while the national category is based on the reading, explication and interpretation of the Quran as well as gender-based studies (Al-Sharmani, 2014:86). The author also stresses that within those categories exist other categories that are classified epistemologically: “the Qur’an and its exegetical tradition” (Al-Sharmani, 2014:86), meaning that the work of Islamic feminists would rather concern the philosophical interpretation of the Quran sacred texts; and the other “focuses on critical engagements with

Islamic *fiqh*<sup>3</sup> or jurisprudence” (Al-Sharmani, 2014:86) which examines the Quran and comprehends the message of Islam and the *Sharia*<sup>4</sup> on a legal standpoint.

Moreover, among these categories, the author stresses that there can be two different hermeneutical approaches to Islamic feminism:

“The first entails critiquing interpretive textual traditions such as *tafsir* and *fiqh* in light of the ethical principles which constitute, as argued, the Qur’anic worldview and core message. And the second approach is related to demystifying the assumed singularity, immutability, and sanctity of the Islamic textual tradition.” (Al-Sharmani, 2014:86)

The first approach broadly aims to change the Islamic gender-inequality train of thoughts through a Quranic ethical point of view of Islamic law, pointing out the contradictions between the Sharia and the religious instructions present in the Quran, such as the relationship that God has towards humans and the relationship that humans should have between them. The second approach tries to legitimate the fact that the assumed perceptions of the sacred texts can be interpreted in different ways and that there is not a single interpretation of these texts. Both approaches aim to change the perception of gender-equality made by men throughout the study of the Quran by demonstrating that certain aspects of the sacred texts and their main interpretation can be ethically in contradiction with the Sharia, and, on the other hand, opening minds as to the fact that there cannot be a unique interpretation of the instructions made in the Quran. Through both approaches, even though they do not appear to be homogenous, the effect that they seek is broadly the same: leading people to another way of thinking in regards to gender-equality through different studies and interpretations of the Islamic texts.

### *2.3 Intersectionality and the question of freedom of choice*

Intersectionality is a core and very important concept when talking about feminism. Indeed, it stresses the fact that gender is not the unique source of discrimination that a woman

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<sup>3</sup> The word *Fiqh* means the Islamic Jurisprudence in Arabic language

<sup>4</sup> The word *Sharia* means the Islamic law in Arabic language

can encounter in her life. Each individual on earth is different and has her/his own features and characteristics. Gender, religion, race, social class, are all factors that constitute our identities as human beings. When discrimination is crossing several of these factors, it creates an intersectionality, a discrimination with multiple sources, which is much harder to fight against than being discriminated against by the gender only, or by the skin colour only. Feminism is intersectional in that sense as women can encounter sex discrimination, and discrimination for any other attribute of their identity. If this is the case, their way of emancipation is going to be different than women who are “only” fighting against gender discrimination.

As highlighted before, so many different forms of feminism exist today in the world, and this creates a complexity of defining the term itself due to its plurality. Indeed, even though several movements have been defined and recognised, individuals themselves have different perceptions and conceptions of feminism, rendering the term itself very subjective to each of us. The term Islamic feminism might be more precise than the term feminism itself, but is not less complicated to study, analyse and understand. Islamic feminism became more and more popular from around the 1990s, and creates a deep polemic in regards to the antagonistic dimension of this term. Can Islam and feminism be compatible? What are the exact objectives of this type of feminism?

In general terms, Islamic feminism operates itself with a different manner of reading the Quran and the place of women in society that the Quran is teaching. Originally, Western feminism separates the biblical statements concerning the role of women and the philosophical approach that feminism is resulting from, because as mentioned before, religion can be considered as being inherently patriarchal. On the contrary, Islamic feminism wants to improve the condition of women based on a rereading and a study of the Quran from a different point of view. However, the improvement of women’s condition through an Islamic point of view might be completely different than the improvement of women’s condition through a secular point of view. Indeed, there is a deep discrepancy of beliefs between religious feminists and non-religious feminists. Including religion in a feminist movement could be inconceivable for non-religious feminists as it does not correspond at all to the idea they have of freedom, and of freedom of choice. Therefore, what is the exact objective of Islamic feminism, and is it the same in every country where Islam is present?

Indeed, the objective of Islamic feminism can differ on women themselves if we consider the fact that not every woman in the world lives in the same condition, and it is from this condition that will emerge the desire of fighting to change the status quo. How is this condition shaped, and by whom? Is the society that shapes this condition? If it is, the goal of Islamic feminism will depend on the extent to which governments of countries where Islamic feminist movements are present, are flexible or not. Even though the conception of feminism can be unique to each of us, there is a general tendency that will shape its goals. Indeed, women gather when their conditions of oppression and submission are similar, they are therefore forming a social group fighting for the same goal, and from these general tendencies it is possible to create definitions, even though they are not true for everyone.

This convergence is very well explained by Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun (2008), who writes in her article about the global extension of feminism, that very soon in the history of feminism emerged interrogations and political debates about taking for granted the fact that all dominated women had common interests. In the meantime, new feminist movements were established in India, Africa, and also in the USA. These new movements started contesting the values that Western feminism was promoting at the time, highlighting the fact that social class, ethnicity, colonial past and its consequences had to be taken into account while talking about feminism (Dayan-Herzbrun, 2008). The author sheds light on the fact that this created a divergence of points of view within feminism, between women who claim themselves Universalists, preaching “North” values, which do not automatically correspond to the condition of every woman, and the “Others”. As well explained by Margot Badran (2002), “feminism is a plant that only grows in its own soil”, (this does not mean that ideas and feminist movements are hermetically closed). Furthermore, there are women who have managed to gain powerful positions, who have become women of influence, and who have improved the global status of other women. However, it is questionable whether these women have stepped away from the women that they are supposed to represent. Indeed, gaining more and more power might alienate their thoughts, which will stop them from truthfully represent their initial causes, or which will reproduce the domination relationships that they initially fought against.

It is evident from this how many dimensions must be taken into account when talking about feminism(s). It is not just about women being equal to men, it is rather promoting human values at the deepest level, wanting all human beings to be on the same level,



regardless of their individual features. In relation to this, Asma Lamrabet, another leading scholar in Islamic feminist studies, completely rejects the emancipation model of Western feminism and defines herself as an Islamic feminist. At the same time, she claims and promotes universal feminist values such as autonomy, independence, equality, and the abolition of gender discriminations. Asma Lamrabet seems to be very insisting on this point as it is what differentiates Western feminism from Islamic feminism, as it differentiates global feminism from all different types of feminism. Nonetheless, she sheds light on the fact that all feminisms have these core values that are universal, but, in a parallel way, the difference between feminisms lies in the way of emancipating women, in the model that they choose to emancipate themselves (Lamrabet, 2017).

In the case of Islamic feminism, going back to the source and to the heart and spirit of the Quran represents the emancipation model through which Muslim women can improve their condition and their place in society. However, the fight is quite challenging to put into practice as there is a need to deconstruct stereotypes about feminism itself, about religion, and about Islam more specifically. As indeed, patriarchal Islamic interpretations of the sacred texts were also transformed into Islamic laws that have been sacralised by men throughout history. Therefore, this adds a much more complicated dimension to the struggle conducted by Islamic feminists since it means that they have to contest the Islamic laws in different contexts. Throughout her writings, Asma Lamrabet seems to have a very important role in bringing back the humanist values of Islam up to date as it should be. Through her faith in Islam she is able to promote and claim the feminist and humanist Islamic values. Also, as very well explained by Badran (2010):

“According to my opinion, Islamic feminism is in the heart of a transformation which seeks to evolve within and inside Islam. Transformation and not reformism, because it is not about amending ideas and patriarchal customs which are infiltrated inside, but rather seeking in depth in the Quran its message of gender equality and social justice, to bring this message back to the conscience’s light, and to express and comply with, by a radical upheaval, what we have been taught for so long what’s Islam.” (Badran, 2010, translated from French)

Asma Lamrabet explicitly refutes the emancipation model of Western feminist women, even though she agrees with certain core ideas of it, but she has drawn the attention on the fact that the emancipation model of Islamic feminism is more likely to be compared

with Black feminism than with Western feminism. Even though there is no religious dimension within Black feminism, Islamic feminism is founded on the discriminatory intersection of being Muslim and being a woman, like it exists in Black feminism between being a woman and being black. Because of this intersectional frame, the two movements are somehow related in their emancipation model through their similarity bond. In the same template, Sara Salem (2013) explains that defining feminism is creating borders, that are excluding some dimensions that might be relevant for the case of other women. By also giving the example of Black feminism, she explains that Western feminism cannot be fully applied to the case of Black women when they are also discriminated against because of their skin colour. In this case, a triple discrimination resulting from the combination of female sex, black skin colour, and social class takes place. Each of these parameters triggers vulnerabilities from which discrimination is much harder to overcome.

In relation to this, the social concept of structural vulnerability<sup>5</sup> very well explains the mechanism of persecution that exists behind a source of discrimination, which becomes even stronger when there are intersectionalities between the sources of discrimination. Structural vulnerabilities basically represent the extent to which individuals are able to face and overcome the vulnerabilities that they experience in their lives, depending on their condition and environment. The more their condition is unfavourable to a viable development, the more complicated it will be to overcome the vulnerabilities encountered in life, and the more the vulnerabilities will be numerous. The capacity of the individual to surmount events in life will depend on the scope for manoeuvre that they are given by their environment in order to deal with it. As stated by Young (2011), structural injustice:

“exists when social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time that these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them.” (Young, 2011: 52)

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<sup>5</sup> This concept is used by many authors in social sciences, and its invention is generally attributed to the sociologist Johan Galtung (1969) (apud Quesada, Hart and Bourgeois: 2011). It is mainly used in studies about the impacts of poverty on human development. However, the core sense of the concept corresponds perfectly to the context of Islamic feminism. Indeed, being deprived of a certain freedom and rights will negatively impact individuals in their social development.

In other words, if social groups are persecuted for discriminatory reasons, they will be less likely to be able to achieve their own human development as they will have much more barriers than a “non-persecuted” individual. In that sense, their society is reducing their ability to respond to social changes or shocks they can experience during their lives and their society is a full element of such shocks.

Salem (2013) also tries to apply this concept to Islamic feminism, pointing out the fact that Muslim women are intersectionally oppressed. This is exactly the same for every woman in the world, we all have different identities, backgrounds, realities, and from that, the author claims that from the moment there is no “universal woman”, there cannot be a “universal feminism” (Salem, 2013: 5). The scholar also specifies that Muslim women are all put in the same bag, therefore hiding “the specificities of each woman’s lived reality and instead centres the debate on false consciousness.” (Salem, 2013: 5). And indeed, there can be this intersectionality regarding Islam and gender, and resulting in a double discrimination. However, such discrimination will have different nuances depending on the opinion of the discriminator in regards to these features. For example, the interpretation of Islam in many Muslim societies is rather patriarchal, showing undeniable inequalitarian practices towards women. These practices are being justified and legitimised by the religion itself. While in non-Muslim societies, which are patriarchal as well, Muslim women are being discriminated because of their gender and because they are being considered as victims since Islam in Western societies is being viewed as inherently misogynist. By considering them as victims, Muslim women are being taken off their own individual choices, their own freedom of religion and spirituality. Even though in both cases, intersectionality remains similar, with the crossing of gender and religion as intolerance factors, discrimination is somehow different depending on the beliefs of the societies they live in. As discrimination is different, then the response to it is different too, which creates several models of women’s emancipation within Islamic feminism itself, and within other types of feminism. As stated by Zahra Ali (2012) “by claiming an acknowledgment of the plurality of emancipation models, Islamic feminism is located in the line of the black feminism critique” (Ali, 2012).

This is creating several categories within feminism and within Islamic feminism itself. As explained above, it can be said that there are several levels of intersectionality. On the one hand, there is a “global” intersectionality, which represents the combination of two main discrimination factors, gender and Islam, and on the other hand, the “specific”

intersectionality, combining many other sub factors of discrimination. The intersectionality in Islamic Feminism is very strong as it can combine many factors of discrimination, which are going to be different depending on the social context. I would like to point out that these factors are themselves very subjective as it depends on the discriminator's point of view. Without normalising discriminations in general, the reality is that individuals do not experience all the same discriminatory factors, certain factors might be more discriminatory than others depending on opinions, beliefs, culture, and society. These discriminatory factors might also be different depending on countries, then the response to these will also be different (Hamidi, 2014). Within the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, women can face several discriminations at once, depending on their. In particular, Muslim women are often considered as "women who need to be saved", as victims, by occidental countries. In my opinion, the fact of being considered as victims is also a source of discrimination as it means that the inclusion of Islam within feminism is not being taken seriously. Of course, not every discriminatory factor will be experienced by every Muslim woman, but throughout my readings and perceptions, these are the main factors for which Muslim women can be discriminated against.

As explained by Malika Hamidi (2014), there is a certain "neo colonial relationship of domination between western feminists and Islamic feminists" due to the inclusion of religion within feminism and especially the inclusion of Islam, which Western feminists do not believe could improve women's condition. Hamidi (2014) strengthens the idea that, as a Muslim feminist, being considered as a victim is another form of discrimination, which completely enters in the intersectional dimension of women's discrimination. Therefore, there is a need of "bridging secular and religious voices on their common struggles" (Hamidi, 2014), which are mainly gender equality and the abolition of every discrimination. This represents a very big and multi-dimensional challenge for Islamic feminists and for their discriminations on both sides: on the one hand, gender discrimination they are victims of in the name of their religion, and, on the other hand, discrimination that they suffer from being religious, having faith in a religion that is considered as evil and misogynist all over the world.

This brings back to the original question of individual choice and to what extent religious women's individual choice is considered as being a freedom stopper, and against the principles of Western feminism. Actually, freedom of choice could be considered as a sign of

emancipation and independence: having the right to “choose” what our lives should be, and what makes us evolve as human beings, is the ultimate dimension of freedom. However, from which moment our choices *really* are free? The way we are choosing and making decisions in our lives is shaped by our culture, education, beliefs, personality, etc. These aspects of our lives, which make our identities, and the experiences, which construct us as human beings actually also shape the way we think and the decisions that we are making. Through this, individuals are only able to make choices under certain possibilities and circumstances that are driven by the society, by education, by culture, by beliefs of what would make us happy. From the moment individuals have this consciousness, that our education, culture, experiences, and society have built us the way we are, we are able to make “free” choices. In the context of religion, this is a concept that is much harder to understand. How is it possible to make free choices within religion? According to Salem (2013):

“Religious women are seen as possessing no agency, in contradistinction to secular society, “which locates religious authority and practice outside the spheres of politics or the marketplace, allows for domains of free, autonomous behaviour.”

Throughout her research, Salem (2013) explains that this creates a binary dimension as to what is secular, and what is spiritual, which also brings the question of subjectivity. Salem (2013) further argues that there is a way to reconcile agency with religion, and that the simple fact of using religion to “displace social norms reflects capacity for action” (Salem, 2013: 7), is in itself a form of independence and freedom of choice within a challenging power context.

# Islamic Feminism in its different contexts

## 3.1 *Development of Islamic Feminism in France*

### 3.1.1 Secularism and rise of Islamophobia in France

In the past few years, the rise of Islamophobia and populist movements in Europe has drastically increased. Notably in France, in which extreme right political parties never had been so popular (33,9% for the Rassemblement National, an extreme right political party during the past presidential elections in France in 2017<sup>6</sup>). According to the CCIF (Collectif contre l'Islamophobie en France) report of 2017, the political Islamophobia in France is almost omnipresent in several political parties, having discriminatory speeches targeting the Muslim citizens and problematizing them on an “identitary, securitary, and fakely equalitarian model” (CCIF, 2017). These speeches are often justified and legitimised by misusing strong values such as “secularity, feminism, and freedom of speech”. The CCIF (2017) qualifies this Islamophobia as a “securitarian Islamophobia”, due to the rise of terrorism and the recent terrorist attacks perpetrated in France since 2015. Political leaders have used the feeling of fear that arose from those attacks as a tool to condone unjustified hate towards Muslim people, claiming anti-terrorism and anti-radical policies to reassure the nation in regards to people’s safety. This has created an amalgam in people’s mind, confusing what’s being Muslim and what’s being a terrorist in the name of Islam.

“Islamity” is now considered by several politicians, French intellectuals, and law enforcement as being an “objective risk” to the French community and values (CCIF, 2017). On the unique principle of degree of “Islamity”, Muslim people receive a much different treatment, which gives direct way to institutional discrimination. As this is a subtle discrimination being normalised by political leaders, French people feel “allowed”, “freer”, to claim their animosity towards the Muslim community. In point of fact, islamophobic acts dramatically increased in 2015 counting 905, right after the terrorist attacks (CCIF, 2017). These acts represent discriminations, hateful speeches, attacks against Muslim institutions,

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<sup>6</sup> Domestic Ministry: [https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult\\_\\_presidentielle-2017/\(path\)/presidentielle-2017/FE.html](https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult__presidentielle-2017/(path)/presidentielle-2017/FE.html)

and aggressions. Even though these kinds of acts have decreased in the past years, the amalgam in the political discourses and in people's mind is still very present. According to Bechroui (2017), it exists an ambivalence of political discourses, assuring the reject of amalgams, but producing them at the same time. Even though rejected in the political speeches, they are practically expressed in the efforts of fighting against terrorism targeting Muslim communities (Bechroui, 2017). Bechroui also enlightens the fact that "the words stigmatizing Muslim communities (such as the polemic of the burkini in France for example) have serious negative effects on the stigmatized population in terms of psychological impact, socialisation, and opportunities" (Bechroui, 2017). The author also stresses that these islamophobic discourses are "counterproductive, putting in danger the Muslim community, dividing the society, raising fear, and in the end serve the objectives of terrorist organisations such as Daech" (Bechroui, 2017)

### 3.1.2 The impact on Muslim women

The emergence of this securitarian and identitarian Islamophobia is the cause of numerous forms of discriminations towards the whole French Muslim community. However, Muslim women are the main victims of it as they represent 75% of the victims of Islamophobia (CCIF, 2017). Not only are they victims of daily violences and discriminations, but also in the access of public services and in the access to work and education. The example of the veil is the main representation of this discrimination. Indeed, several laws, which have been created in order to facilitate the access to work, have actually aggravated the situations of thousands of Muslim women, while the rate of their unemployment is already higher than the average in France. For example, the law El Khomri (2016) has given the possibility to companies to impose to their employees an "ideological and religious neutrality". This means that it can be forbidden, in certain sectors such as the public one, to wear any symbol of religion if it is considered as impairing the business. This basically gives the right to companies to discriminate any employee by imposing dress codes and religious control over them. This has created an extreme difficulty for Muslim women to access to a professional activity due to the question of the veil, which is considered as an ostentatious religious sign. According to Teeple Hopkins (2017), these laws are "aggravating an already existing islamophobia, and demonstrate that Muslim women encounter much more difficulties at

finding a job than any other religion in France” (Teeple Hopkins: 2017). Teeple Hopkins (2017) also sheds light on the fact that Muslim women must be understood not only as women or Muslim, but as both, explaining the dimension of sexism within Islamophobia. As she quotes from the CCIF report of 2016:

“We are never only women” underlines the sociologist Amélie Le Renard; Muslim women are targeted because they are women, and Muslim. Women represents more than 80% of victims of islamophobic violence. Physical aggressions perfectly illustrate the intersectionality of violence: aggressors attack Islamic symbols (the veil), as well as the body of their victims (sexual violence)” (Le Renard, 2016, apud CCIF, 2016, apud Teeple Hopkins, 2017, apud CCIF, 2017, translated from French)

Once again, through the analysis of Muslim women lives and fights, we always come back to the question of intersectionality, which constitutes an integral element of feminism, and which is particularly relevant and represents strong evidence in the case of Islamic feminism. As explained above and by many authors, it exists this double discrimination for Muslim women which will be much harder to overcome and to fight against due to the multidimensional aspect of their condition.

On top of the access to work problematic, Muslim women are victims of discriminations that are in a sense, allowed, and directed by politicians. In mainstream political debates, leaders have edified a certain profile of Muslim women quite degrading for them. As an example given in the CCIF report (2017), the last French minister in charge of women’s rights, Laurence Rossignol, has compared Muslim women to “black Americans supporting slavery”. This is a declaration from a leader who is supposed to represent the interests of each woman’s reality, but, on the other hand, she has exposed Muslim women to many violences and discriminations. It seems that the source of this discrimination towards women is more based on an identitarian crisis, an “outrage to feminism” and secularity, rather than based on a false anti-terrorism kind of discrimination. Besides these lowering political discourses, France has tried to tackle the problematics linked to the wearing of the veil by launching polemics which caused unrealistic confrontations between law enforcement officers and Muslim women. Notable is the case of the “burkini” which started in 2016, when officers requested certain women to take off their clothes, depriving Muslim women from their rights and fundamental freedom as human beings.



### 3.1.3 Muslim women responses and model of emancipation

Islamic feminism in France is not exactly fighting for equal rights between men and women. This feminist movement rather aims to tackle several discriminations that Muslim women are suffering from and are currently facing in France. The goal of the movement is not at all opposed to Islamic feminism in other contexts as they want to improve Muslim women's conditions through reinterpreting Islamic texts in a more egalitarian sense. However, instead of fighting for more rights like Moroccan women, French Muslim women fight against the conservative customs, made in the name of the French "untouchable" secularism and equality, towards Islam and towards feminism. For example, the question of the veil has been considered as an outrage to secularism, especially in relation to the ostentatious aspect of it, but also as an outrage to liberal feminism as to its misinterpreted representation of subordination. It is quite surprising from the "country of freedom" not to accept the veil, as based on the assumption that this is a sign of submission and belonging to someone. In the end, women are not free to wear the veil as they would like to in France, and they are not free not to wear it in some other Muslim countries. They are not free, anywhere.

France, among many other Western countries, has this unfortunate habit to assume that its own conceptions of freedom, secularism, and feminism, are unique and universal. From this, the aim of Islamic feminism is to demonstrate through the study of the Quran how Islam and feminism can still be compatible, in order to reject this universal model of women's emancipation and to lead towards the acceptance of Islam as a religion in which free choices can be made from both men and women. At least, theoretically, France has made of secularism and freedom its own doctrine, also promoting a unique and universal interpretation. However, other core values of the French Republic, such as the freedom of expression, freedom of thought, equality, fraternity, have fortunately helped to open minds, for example towards the question of Islam in France and to what exactly secularism and freedom are, allowing Muslim women to make their voices heard, and being involved in the political life as well.

Nevertheless, the main problems that French Muslim women encounter are the stereotypes and assumptions related to the religion of Islam and the Quran. As explained by Sara Salem, this is hiding "the specificities of each woman's lived reality and instead centres the debate on false consciousness" (2013). In the majority of cases, France has put all Muslim

women in only one social category, wrongly thinking that all Muslim women are religiously unable to make free choices and are, according to a certain interpretation of Islam, inferior to men (this assumption mostly comes from the fact of wearing the veil). This means therefore putting into question the notion of agency from Muslim women, which is very important in French values, wondering whether or not they are able to act independently and to make their own free choices in the name of religion. As articulated by Salem:

“Choices are never “free” in the sense that they are never made outside of power structures or hegemonic systems and ideals. Nevertheless, it is clear that certain “choices” have been designated as feminist or emancipatory while others have been designated as oppressive. Following this, women who make “choices” that are seen as oppressive are suffering from false consciousness and thus have not reached the stage of liberation other women have reached [...]” (Salem, 2013: 7)

Considering this, the progress of Islamic feminism in France highly depends onto what extent the capacity of Muslim women to make their own choices is considered as to be oppressive or emancipatory in relation to Islam. Therefore, the goal of Islamic feminism to stop the persecution Muslim women are suffering from results in proving how, through the reinterpretation of the Quran, women can be free to wear the veil and exercise their religion without suffering from any patriarchal and social subordination. Ironically, France is the entity that is trying to subordinate them, and impair their freedom, in the name of freedom and secularism. Moreover, they are being discriminated by political leaders and institutions that are supposed to support them. All this is based on a deep misunderstanding of Islam, and on an attack to values that are considered to be the opposites of the image of the religion itself.

Malika Hamidi (2018), as Muslim feminist, explains in an interview<sup>7</sup> that:

“Twenty years ago, we were discussing the reasons for the veil dressing as spiritual, intimate, and personal. But today, according to my field research, a new generation of women claim the veil dressing way beyond these reasons. They triggered a French styled outcry precisely because of this issue of accepting the visibility of the religion in public spaces. An interviewed Muslim told me: “my head-scarf is political”.

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<sup>7</sup> Hamidi M. (2017), *Un féminisme musulman, et pourquoi pas?*

We must not understand political in the political Islam sense of the term, but in the noble sense of the term: today, it's about "empowerment", about a "socio-political seizure of power". These are women who do not live the veil as an imprisonment, but as radiance in European societies. The generation of our mothers had to hug to walls, but this new generation clearly defies the power, for a collective liberation. They master the international and national political stakes, and it's in that way that they bother and worry." (Hamidi, 2018, translated from French)

From these words, it is very clear how wearing the veil is a claim of religion, of freedom, of pride, and of emancipation for French Muslim women. They claim their freedom by wearing the veil as the French government tries to take it away from them. There is unfairness and contradiction in telling them what "not to wear" in the name of freedom, and at the same time depriving them from their right and liberty to wear what they would like to wear. I think that beyond secularism and occidental feminism, which to me are false "justifications" to hide behind such political and social actions, France is mostly afraid of change and diversity. For example, the opposite of racism is not to erase the differences, but on the contrary preaching and accepting the differences between human beings, that is what makes our diversity and wealth. This is also what freedom is supposed to be about, welcoming the differences and accepting them. In the case of Islamic Feminism in France, the veil is used as a tool to reach this acceptance of religion, diversity, and proclamation of one's own beliefs which are not dangerous for others.

Throughout the studies I conducted in these months, it seems to me that, besides being the victims of a huge injustice, French Muslim women are far from considering themselves as being victims of their religion, and their fight is conducted in accordance with their beliefs as spiritual, and rational beings, as women educated with both the French culture in the public sphere, and the Moroccan culture in the private sphere. They are also giving a lot of their soul to be freed from the patriarchal interpretation of their religion, which is undeniable. In that sense, it is very interesting to observe that their way of emancipation is based on different approaches to Islamism by trying to lead people towards other trains of thoughts in regards to their religion, and, on the other hand, their activism is also in a sense very westernized as they are using these strong morals that are very much valued in France, such as freedom, equality and secularism.

From my perspective, they are turning these morals to their advantage in order to conduct their fight for acceptance, equality and freedom of religion. This is somehow overwhelming for the French government and population, as it is questioning deeply what are the true definitions of these ideals that are valued so much in France. Along with their struggle, Muslim women also bear with them this fear to change their habits and to give broader definitions to the morals they lived their entire lives by. In this way, Muslim women's fight for acceptance and rights is very hard to run. On one hand, they are bearing their own intimate, personal fight, which is to reinterpret Islam in a more egalitarian sense. On the other hand, they must fight against their perceived condition as women, and fight to reinterpret the values that France is preaching almost as a religion. In a sense, they show to French people how wrong they are about the definition they give to what is truly freedom, what is truly equality, what is truly fraternity, and what is truly secularity. This brings along a very deep questioning about the meaning of these values. For this reason, it is very interesting to see how France can run counter to the values that they are actually proclaiming as universal.

## 3.2 *Development of Islamic Feminism in Morocco*

### 3.2.1 Political and religious contexts and its impacts on women

#### 3.2.1.1 Political Islam and the application of the *Shari'a*

In the last few decades, Morocco has experienced processes mainly due to the socio-political changes and the rise of political Islam that occurred after the country's independence in 1956<sup>8</sup>. According to the French Islamologist and political scientist, François Burgat, political Islam has found its origin in reaction to colonialism and developed itself within social and political organisations at the beginning of the 20th century (2016). However, it is only around the 1970s that islamists became real part of the political power in Maghreb (Burgat, 2016, apud Blanc, 2017). This reformist impetus aimed to fight against the occidentalisation of the country, to bring back religion into the political sphere by applying the law of the *Shari'a* and, to "Islamise modernity" instead of "modernising Islam" (Ayubi,

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<sup>8</sup>Chronological history of Morocco, seen online in : <https://www.cairn.info/histoire-du-maroc-depuis-l-independance--9782707190659-page-110.htm?contenu=resume>

1991: 231, apud Blanc, 2017). Several political parties emerged from these reformist movements, in order to transmit religious knowledge and to reform the society in a post-colonial context (Belal, 2013). Besides the efforts of several organisations aiming to apply the *Shari'a*, Morocco uses partly the Islamic law in the Constitution. Meaning that the *Shari'a* is considered as being “the supreme reference”; however, certain political Islamic parties also consider the sovereignty of the people (Dialmy 2016). Therefore, the religion has a great legitimacy but is conciliated with the democracy due to the non-rigorous application of the *Shari'a*. Even though the *Shari'a* is not fully applied in Morocco, this creates an ambiguity that the political system takes advantage of. As best explained by Dialmy (2016), a Moroccan sociologist:

“The political system uses this ambiguity in order to stay in a structural and structural indecision. This conflicting tie between the “laissez-faire” and the prohibition is an indicator that shows that we simultaneously bet on modern and religious registries. But without going neither all the way on one side nor on the other. The marriage between commandment of believers and modern constitutionality means both the unwillingness to apply the *Shari'a* in the literal and exclusive sense, and the unwillingness to secularise the juridico-political system.” (Dialmy, 2016, translated from French)

### 3.2.1.2 The *Mudawana*

Even though the King Mohammed VI has been engaged with political, economical, and social modernisation of the country by means of several reforms serving to the social protection and political transparency<sup>9</sup>, the status of women in the Moroccan society has not been improved. Firstly, it is necessary to have a look at the Moroccan familial code, the *Mudawana*. The *Mudawana* is an Islamic text explaining the familial rights, that has been juridically codified under the King Mohammed V in 1958 (Murgue, 2011). This doctrine became the fundamental familial code, faithful to the classical tradition of Islam. The main principles of this code were essentially patriarchal, with the ascendancy of the husband on his wife, as the core principles of the *Mudawana* based on the Islamic law and jurisprudence (*Shari'a* and *Fiqh*). It was considered as “divine

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/maroc/presentation-du-maroc/>

and inalterable” (Murgue, 2011). Nevertheless, the *Mudawana* has been the subject of two reforms in the recent Moroccan history, mainly due to the patriarchal model of it, which only allowed men to bring revenues to households and which did not allow modest families to have a decent financial situation, and also due to the women’s will to obtain a certain independence and to participate to the family’s wealth.

Since the 1990s, the struggle for women’s rights became more and more intense, and the *Mudawana* was no longer realistic in regards to their claims. The family code was not at all in accordance with women’s realities and demands. Several feminist organisations started to collect signatures and to push the government to reform the familial code. Additionally, the international opinion about women’s status in Morocco also pushed such claims further, which helped to be escalated at the political level. In order to ease the tensions that arose from these political and social demands, King Hassan II agreed on partially reviewing<sup>10</sup> the *Mudawana* in 1993 (Murgue, 2011). This resulted in: the wives became able to have custody of their children, forced marriage was abolished, and polygamy and repudiation became harder to practice, even though they remained legal (Murgue, 2011). Besides the fact that reforming the *Mudawana* was already a big step in the Moroccan history, this still has not entitled women to the rights they were claiming, such as being considered as full human beings.

The second reform to the *Mudawana* occurred more recently, in 2004, under King Mohammed VI, in response to a growing demand from women to be more engaged in political life. Despite his attachment to the Islamic traditions, Mohammed VI showed openness to gender equality. This reform included important improvements such as: the minimum age to get married increased up to 18 years old for women, family is now under the responsibility of the two spouses, polygamy became harder to practice and repudiation is now under a juridical control (Murgue 2001). This reformist approach to *Mudawana* was supported by several feminist and human rights organisations. On the other hand, it was highly contested by conservative and traditionalist parties and organisations such as the *Al Adl Wal Ihsane* movement, which

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<sup>10</sup> As the Commander of the Believers, the King is the only authority who has the power and who is entitled to determine the interpretation of the sacred texts (*Ijtihad*).

is against the improvement of the position of women in society and which preaches a traditionalist approach to Islam. From their perspective, this new interpretation of *Mudawana* was considered as an outrage to the sacred texts in the sense of politicising the family debate that is supposed to be sacred, and not a source of debate. According to Murgue (2011), the reforms to the *Mudawana* were carrying hope as to the emancipation and the improvement of women's conditions in Morocco. However, these reforms were still not corresponding to the expectations and demands of Moroccan women. Despite the improvements made, women are still suffering from the oppression of men and still have fewer rights than them. Although the reforms officially improved certain aspects of women's rights, the practical reality remains much different. As explained by Murgue (2011):

“The patriarchal system remains an obstacle to its implementation. The text has established the wedding minimum legal age at 18 for girls. But in 2007, familial judges have accepted more than 85% demands of early marriage (Bencheikh, 2009). At its enactment, the *Mudawana* has had a dissuasive effect, although Moroccans realised how easy it was to obtain derogations. [...] Polygamy and children custody can have the same derogations. Bitter conclusion. Indeed, without the implication of the government, this is not the promulgation of a new law which is going to change the mentalities and ancestral traditions of the greater number.” (Murgue, 2011, translated from French)

Even though improvements to the family code were made, and certain demands accepted, Morocco did not develop the juridical means for its application and certain traditional practices are still occurring. The main consequence is that these changes have modified the life conditions of the higher social class much more than the life conditions of the most disadvantaged people. However, these changes are also the sign that Morocco stepped into a social and political transformation in regards to women's rights, the public and political debates made in regards to the reforms of the family code have distraught traditional Islamic practices in the Muslim world.

### 3.2.1.3 Women in the Arab uprisings in Morocco

The revolt movements that occurred in the Middle East and in North Africa in 2011 in the context of the Arab Spring were the result of the people not being satisfied with their country's regimes and governments. This wave of rebellion started in Tunisia in December 2010 and quickly spread itself throughout the region, like a domino effect. People gathered to protest mainly against their corrupted governments and patriarchal authoritarianism, demanding for drastic changes in politics towards democracy and social justice.

Even though Morocco was not the most affected country, it did not avoid the influence generated by the Arab Springs. The well-known movement of "February 20th" initiated pacific protests in the Moroccan streets. Among several requests from the people such as the democratisation of the monarchy, the end of the authoritarian regime, improvements in the social life, individual freedoms, right equality for all (Abdelmoumni, 2013), women also made their voices heard by protesting in the streets for gender equality, and for democracy that goes along with it. Indeed, women were holding protest signs reminding that "there is no democracy without half of the population, in this case, women" (Abounaï, 2012). Despite the fact that women's claims for their emancipation started way before the Arab Springs, the wave of revolts gave them the opportunity to legitimise and to openly and publicly criticise their conditions and ask for amendments. Furthermore, the access to social media allowed the protests to be seen internationally and this has constituted a lever for women to be heard.

At the start of the movement "February 20th", the protests stayed very subtle<sup>11</sup> in order not to attract the anger of certain Islamism and conservative organisations, which are against the improvement of women's condition, such as *Al Adl Wal Ihsane* (Abounaï, 2012). However, protests against women's rights in other North African countries have pulled them to create women's commissions to value their claims aiming to defend women's rights, and fighting side by side with the most vulnerable segments of society (Abounaï, 2012). They openly showed their discontent in regards to the intention of men to democratise the country without them. In order to ease the tensions and bring social peace to the country, King

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<sup>11</sup> Subtle in the sense that they tried not to claim specific rights in regards to the women's condition. They rather protest for democracy and equality for all, which inherently implies their condition to be improved, but which does not request specific requirements in terms of their rights (Abounaï, 2013). This occurred just in the beginning of the "February 20th" movement, then it changed after several claims against women's rights were made.



Mohammed VI amended the Constitution in 2011, promising the protection of human rights and democracy for all. Following this amendment, the “moderate” Islamist Party, Justice and Development (PJD), won the elections in November 2011, focusing the electoral campaign on the fight against corruption and authoritarianism, by means of religion and traditions (Abdelmoumni, 2013). In spite of recognising gender equality, only one woman became part of the government. This implied once again a much harder application of the improvements that were made to the Constitution. However, it is undeniable that Islamic feminist activists that took part during the Arab Springs have given hope of conciliation between religion and a truthful application of democracy. As stated by El Haitami (2016):

“Female Islamist participation in the Moroccan Spring has also been inspired by the expansion of an Islamist- based model of female activism, which raises questions about the possibility of reconciling Islam with democracy through the political dominance of Islamist parties in the post- Arab Spring era (Muhanna, 2012). These new political changes have become threatening to liberal movements, especially in that the emerging female Islamist voices have reshuffled the dynamics of state elite feminism; for the first time in Morocco the veil has made public appearance within the government. This has introduced new spaces for contention, such as the emerging nuanced female political and civic expression(s), as well as prospects for Islamist and liberal women’s movements to negotiate and strategize, in order to ensure a democratic approach to gender issues.” (El Haitami, 2016: 79)

The Arab Spring wave represented an opportunity for women to claim their rights loudly, alongside with equality and social justice for all. In between the protests, they managed to be involved in the political life, even though at a low scale, and to obtain gender equality in the Constitution. However, this does not mean that customs and traditions have disappeared from their daily lives. Religion is still an important part of the government with a moderate Islamic party on the top; the interpretation of the sacred texts remains patriarchal and in the hands of King Mohammed VI, the only detentor of the *Ijtihad*<sup>12</sup> as the Commander of Believers. Notwithstanding, there is an undeniable hope for women’s conditions in Morocco to be improved alongside with political Islam. The improvements made in the Moroccan Constitution, along with the election of an Islamist party at the head of the

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<sup>12</sup> Term used to determine the interpretation of the sacred texts, literally meaning “the effort of reflexion” in Arabic language.

government, have demonstrated that feminism and Islam are not antagonistic and that both can coexist, although the place of women in the Moroccan society is yet to be improved.

### 3.2.2 Emancipation model of Moroccan Feminists

Throughout the Moroccan social and political history, women have become stronger and stronger in their fight. As previously explained, Islamic feminism has encountered multiple transformations and trends emerging from the socio-political changes that occurred also in Morocco. In the very beginning, secular feminism appeared within the Moroccan society, which evolved under colonialism, and later on Islamic feminism came to light, in response to the secularist trend of feminism (Sadiqi, 2016). As a result so far, women have managed to be involved into the political life, aiming to improve women's rights while using their Islamic faith and principles. El Haitami, by citing Sadiqi, explains how entering into the political sphere constitutes in itself a "feminist act":

"This, according to Fatima Sadiqi, is a "feminist act" as it allows women's entry into the historically male-dominated structures. Sadiqi further argues that the fact that religious feminism in Morocco was not conceived as a reaction to liberal feminism makes rapprochement possible and constructs polyvalent expressions of political activism (Sadiqi, 2003)." (El Haitami, 2016: 74)

At this point, it is important to point out that Moroccan feminism is not at all a projection of occidental feminism, and does not use this feminism as a model to conduct the movement. Islamic feminism in Morocco rather emerged, as mentioned before, in a post-independence context, like political Islam. As a matter of fact, Moroccan society has created this strong opposition to the occidental model in reaction to colonialism, and has constructed its identity by this opposition. Hence, feminist movements were discredited as they were considered as being the reflection of an occidental influence and model, which was not at all in accordance with Islam. However, the rise of Islamic feminism in Morocco has not grown in response to the influence of occidental countries, but rather emerged from a deep conviction that the Quran was carrying a message of equality of all human beings.

Furthermore, it is actually the colonisation of Morocco by France that has institutionalised and politicised Islam, creating penal codes based on the sacred texts and so

on. There is therefore such a divergence and confusion between, on the one hand, being opposed to the occidentalisation of the country, and, on the other, having a colonial past that has had the responsibility of creating political Islam but, at the same time, has tried to modernise the country. This has generated a deep misunderstanding regarding the Moroccan identity, even for Moroccans themselves, in between the Arab culture and their colonial past which has westernised the country. In that sense, there is this strong difficulty for Moroccan women to be granted credit to their fight for two main reasons: on the one side, having “westernised” thoughts in regards to what women’s conditions should be, and therefore being considered as not having enough faith in Islam. On the other side, trying to reinterpret the Quranic texts (*Ijtihad*) and not being in the right to do so, according to the current interpretation of Islam. In both cases, women are being discriminated against by Moroccan society in regards to their gender, in regards to their relationship with Islam, and in regards to the position and role they should have according to a patriarchal interpretation of Islam.

The fact that women are considered as being inherently unequal to men is actually a thought that is also common to the other two most practiced monotheistic religions in the world such as Christianity and Judaism. However, there is a difference between institutionalised religions and the spiritual messages that religion carries (Lamrabet, 2016). Most of the religious interpretations were made by men, in a patriarchal way, and were then deemed as sacred. Nevertheless, as analysed by Lamrabet (2016), the Quran is sacred, but its human interpretation cannot be sacred if it is interpreted only by men. In that sense, there is a need to desacralize the interpretations made of the Quran. She is also pointing out that these interpretations (about gender equality and the position and role of men and women) are only based on a few verses of the Quran. Therefore, it is inaccurate to deem women and men as unequal in Islam, only by interpreting a few verses that go in that sense. Lamrabet (2016) also mentions that the predominant traditionalist lecture of the Quran and the codification of the Islamic texts have completely marginalised the Quranic ethics and women’s contribution. On the contrary, there is a need to forget about the traditionalist approach to Islam and to think of a reformist and contextualised approach. In order to put this into practice, Lamrabet (2016) proposes three new ways of reading the Quran:

- Firstly, a holistic reading instead of a fragmented one is required. As mentioned before, the current interpretation of Islam in terms of gender equality is only based on a few verses. Lamrabet explains that certain verses in the sacred texts can only be

explained by other verses. Therefore, there is a need to make a complete rereading of the Quran in order to seize the full message of it.

- Secondly, she is suggesting having a finalist reading of the sacred texts, meaning to understand what really the aim and purposes of the verses are.
- Thirdly, Lamrabet mentions that there should be a contextualised reading. Each verse was transmitted in a certain context which is different today. *Ijtihad* should be used as a tool to understand the heart of the verses in their historical contexts, and to adapt them to the current times.

Through these suggestions, Lamrabet explains that it is possible to discover four pillars of the Quran: a universal and fundamental ethic, the liberation of both men and women by the use of the rationale, incitation to knowledge and the exigence of justice (Lamrabet, 2016). In all her activism and faith in both gender equality and Islam, Lamrabet shows a very deep interest in changing the patriarchal image of Islam. Throughout her analyses and studies, she does not only prove the emancipatory message of Islam to the Moroccan people, but she also shows it to the occidental world. It seems that she is playing on both grounds, at the national and transnational levels, by bringing to light at the eyes of everyone her convictions in regards to gender equality in Islam. By raising awareness and desacralizing the patriarchal interpretations of the sacred texts, she is bringing a reformist conception of Islam based on equality, therefore improving women's conditions, at the legal and human levels.

The emancipation model of Muslim women proposed by Asma Lamrabet and by many others as mentioned earlier and including Salem, Badran, Ali, Hamidi, Kian, Mahmood, is related to the concept of intersectional feminism. In the Moroccan society, the intersectionality of discriminations perpetrated against women has two dimensions: the gendered discrimination in its entirety, which is present in each society (even in the most developed societies), and the patriarchal interpretation of Islam, which religiously legitimates this gender discrimination. In many cases, Islamic feminists therefore have followed the line of Black feminism, fighting on one side the underestimation of women as human beings, and on the other side the discrimination made in the name of Islam.

Although it can seem similar and linked to each other, I would like to stress the fact that there is a difference between these two forms of discrimination. Firstly, one can be without the other. Meaning that gender inequality exists even without religion. Secondly,

legitimising gender inequality by religion adds a much more complex problematic as the debate around it is much harder to conduct. Indeed, with gender inequality being “sacralised”, it provides much less scope for manoeuvre for women to legitimise their fight, while being faithful in Islam.

This also brings us back to the concept of structural vulnerabilities, explained above, and connected with the extent to which individuals are able to overcome certain shocks in life depending on their existing resources. As their position is not equal with men’s position in society, women have fewer resources in order to overcome changes or shocks they can experiment in their lives. In other words, their fight for gender equality, for the improvement of their condition within society is much harder to conduct. Indeed, the base they are starting from is already full of obstacles and they are not given the means to overcome these obstacles.

Thanks to the Arab Springs and the women's claims arising from there, Moroccan women have managed to be much more involved in the political life. Along with several feminist organisations, Moroccan women can now engage in political debates and question their position in society, through a deep study of the Quran. This has raised women’s awareness from a spiritual point of view, which then has lead to a practical side, such as the legal amendments that were made so far, but has also showed openness in people’s minds, which in the long term could change the traditionalist approaches towards Islam. Moreover, as pointed out by Dayan-Herzbrun (2008), the reinforcement of what has been called “state feminism”<sup>13</sup> reassembles new figures that constitute a response to the expectations of Muslim feminists:

“It’s about the formation of a *murshidat* body, women in charge to conduct the prayers. This initiative was taken in Morocco almost at the same time as the reform to the *Mudawana* marking therefore the double face that the Moroccan power wants to give, the one of modernity, and the one of legitimation by Islam. The Moroccan *murshidat* are indeed destined to teach the Quran to women living in the slums and poor neighbourhoods, in order to fight against the influence of Islamists, but not the misery.”  
(Dayan-Herzbrun, 2008, translated from French)

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<sup>13</sup> State feminism is the involvement of women in the political sphere as political actors. In other words, it is the representation of women’s interests, by women, at the political level. State feminism aims to improve women’s rights and promotes gender-equality in politics. (Lovenduski, 2005)

Apart from the *murshidat*, Islamic feminism in Morocco also reflects itself in the fight for democracy and its application. These are two struggles that go along with each other according to feminists in Morocco. As mentioned before, there cannot be democracy if women are not included in it, if they cannot enjoy fundamental rights and liberty. The work and activism of Islamic feminists has been then acted around two founding pillars: the fight for gender equality, both in the law and within society, and the fight for democracy. This has operated very well with the election of the Parti Justice et Développement (PJD), which, in spite of being Islamist, is fighting for a democratic and egalitarian view, both in Islam and within society. In reality, the election of this party denotes an opposition to radical Islamist parties rather than a real belonging and identification to its ideas;

“The PJD promotes women’s participation as significant political actors; this has involved the creation of women’s networks that are engaged in activism to promote women’s roles within an Islamic paradigm, while being open to global discourses on women’s rights. The women’s networks have engaged in different activities, which include providing structured instruction in religion as well as literacy classes. They also promote women’s social and economic independence and empowerment and engage in national and international debates on women’s rights and the role of the Moroccan Family Code (the *mudawana*) in this respect.”  
(El Haitami, 2016: 77)

Along with this, women have also become very involved in academic researches about Islam and feminism, studying both the relationship between gender and Islam, gender equality, and deeply analysing the Quranic sacred texts by means of a reformist and contextualised approach. This also represents a form of activism, a model of emancipation that Moroccan women make their voices heard, without having their faith in Islam questioned. Fatima Sadiqi (2016) sums up women’s practices to fight for their rights:

“The topics of preaching revolve mainly around how a believer should live and practice his or her religion. For example, Islamic feminists both advise women on how to practice their faith and at the same time, disseminate the socio-political perspective that Islam has become misguided due to political interests and misogynistic readings. As for activism, it is largely composed of the organization of religious gatherings and study groups to empower women and allow them to

transform their roles in their families. The inspiration they get from the lives of the Prophet and his Companions is very positive for most women. As for scholarship, it includes a reading of the Qur'an from a feminist point of view." (Sadiqi, 2016)

Through all these struggles, women in Morocco have improved their conditions, have spread a general awareness among their citizens to believe that there can be gender equality in Islam, and have transmitted a message highly emancipatory for women. Contrary to what has happened with Muslim feminists in France, in Morocco it is undeniable that the reinterpretation of religion to reach an evolution of the common opinion and discourses towards women has been used. It is also in that sense, through their faith, that Moroccan women have been able to conduct their battles. It is very interesting to realise how in the past the patriarchal interpretation of Islam could have had such a negative impact on women's rights and freedom, and how this same religion, on the other hand, can be used as a crucial tool to improve their current conditions.

## Conclusions

Islamic feminism is at the heart of many public and political debates since a few years. The world's image of Islam, mainly the Western image of Islam, is very negative and degrading. Indeed, the social contexts in the Middle East and North Africa and, most accurately, the common position of women in Muslim societies are not playing in favour of Islam as being seen as a religion of peace and equality. This triggers hate and discrimination in occidental countries, such as France, against Muslims. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the rise of Islamophobia has not made easy for Muslims to practice their religion in peace. Besides the fact that occidental societies claim themselves as developed, evolved, free and open, gender discrimination is still very present. Hence, the combination of gender discriminations and religious discriminations in France makes Muslim women's lives full of obstacles. On the other hand, in Morocco, gender inequality seems to be rather a cultural issue arising from a patriarchal, traditionalist, and decontextualized approach to Islam. Furthermore, the Moroccan colonial past has created an opposition to occidental values, and has discredited women's claims for their rights, assuming that these demands were emerging from an occidental influence. Last but not least, the inclusion of sacred texts into politics and penal codes has impaired women to fully enjoy their fundamental rights as human beings.

Throughout this research, I can conclude that discriminations made against Muslim women in Morocco and in France are similar on two points: there is an undeniable gender inequality in the two societies, and a further discrimination is also perpetuated in both cases by the traditionalist mainstream and by the governments. However, there are differences: on the one hand, the patriarchal interpretation of religion, which is used in the political arena in Morocco; while, on the other hand, a publicly expressed Islamophobia in France, which emerges mainly from a nearly doctrinal secularity, and the question of freedom of choice which is not understood.

From such realities of discriminations, Muslim women have adopted two models of emancipation to assert their rights based on similarities and differences. These models are partially composed of similar values and ideas, which are also used in Western feminism, such as defining and promoting equal rights for men and women, women's emancipation and independence. Moreover, in both societies, there is a common factor in the emancipation



model that is the reinterpretation of the Islamic texts by means of reformist and contextualised approaches, which are friendlier to gender equality. However, as Muslim feminists in France and in Morocco are evolving in different societies, are experiencing different realities, their emancipation models also come with some differences. In France, Muslim feminists are rather going to lead a fight against the rising Islamophobia, with practical actions such as wearing the veil as a sign of rebellion and freedom, participating in public debates around the question of freedom of choice and freedom of religion. These actions seem to be conducted in accordance with French values, such as freedom, secularity, and equality. In that sense, women try to legitimise their choices and religion by using values that France is very attached to. French Muslim women are fighting on several fields: against Islamophobia, against gender discrimination, for the freedom of choice, and for a more open conception of secularism. Throughout their struggles, Muslim women in France are deeply questioning the French core values, and are promoting their religion as being part of this process.

On the contrary, Muslim women in Morocco rather intend to prove to the Muslim world that Islam is carrying an emancipatory message, fighting for democracy, in order then to have rights and freedom they are entitled to. They are changing the traditionalist and unequal view of Islam that is still very present in Morocco due to the patriarchal interpretation of Islam. By desacralizing this interpretation, defending democracy, and educating the people to a fair and equal Islam, they want to gain more rights and power in order to improve their condition. Furthermore, there are many studies, analyses and researches made by scholars in regards to feminism founded on the Islamic paradigm, both at the national and transnational levels. These works are also helping to raise people's awarenesses (both in occidental and oriental countries), by encouraging women to educate themselves, and to lead people towards new critical pathways, while giving them the sentiment of being even more faithful to their religion.

All in all, the fight that Muslim women have conducted so far is returning the situation. What I mean by "returning the situation" is that until now, the patriarchal interpretation of Islam has also been a way to justify and legitimise gendered discriminations. With the work and researches of Islamic feminist scholars, Islam is on the way to legitimise gender equality, along with equality for all. As a personal note, I would like to point out my admiration for these women, who have kept faith and hope in their religion within a

discriminatory cultural context, and who have managed to turn out their faith into a liberating and emancipated message.

All along this dissertation, I have understood how the relationship between gender and religion is playing an important role in these two models of emancipation. There is an institutionalised thought of religion being inherently patriarchal, which is opposed to the fairness and equality spiritual messages that are at the heart of religion when it is studied in a contextualised way. Besides religion, feminism itself is composed of many dimensions and opinion differences, due to the fact that other discriminatory factors can be added to gender discrimination. Both in the Moroccan and French contexts, women encounter an intersectionality of discriminations, structural vulnerabilities that arise from their respective conditions, and the question of freedom of choice, which seems to be more problematic in France than in Morocco, unexpectedly.

For further investigations about the emancipation models of Islamic feminism, there would be a need to deeply study the reality of Muslim women in each country in which Islam is present, secular and theocratic countries. This would allow understanding globally what the limitations to women's emancipation are, or, on the contrary, what the specific factors that can allow them to be emancipated within their societies and within religion are. To conclude, I would like to underline the relevance of understanding the political stakes of Muslim women's emancipation, including the true reasons behind male domination and the opposition to women having their fundamental rights as human beings. I still wonder whether culture and religion are the only reasons to women's oppression, or, on the contrary, they are used as a pretext for ongoing male domination and political interests.

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