ORGANIZING WOMEN

The New Women's Movement in Algeria

VALENTINE M. MOGHADAM
Illinois State University, Normal

ABSTRACT

This article examines the women's movement in Algeria in the context of domestic developments, such as the post-Boumediene restructuring of the state, regional liberalization, and global developments such as the rise of Islamism and the expansion of feminism. It points to the emergence of the Algerian feminist movement during the crises of the 1980s and 1990s, and to its current interface with regional and transnational feminist organizations.

Key Words: Algeria ♦ Islamism ♦ transnational feminism ♦ women's movement

Introduction

Women are entering the scene as active subjects in the construction of a new citizenship. (Cherifati-Merabtine, 1995: 60)

In a sociological study of ‘female revolt’ and of women’s movements in world-historical perspective, Chafetz and Dworkin stated that ‘independent women’s organizations are totally absent in the Middle East’ (Chafetz and Dworkin, 1986: 191). This statement was rather surprising, given the longevity of a women’s movement in Egypt (see Badran, 1994), but it also ignored two important events. In the first, Iranian women’s groups mobilized themselves in early March 1979 and staged sit-ins and street demonstrations in Tehran to protest against veiling and religious rule. Iranian women’s protest actions were the very first ones against the new revolutionary regime. In the second significant event, Algerian women organized themselves in 1981 in opposition to a Family Law that was being drafted in secret by the new government and which promised to be extremely conservative. Here Algerian women started the first of the social movements that were to transform Algeria. In both Iran and Algeria, feminism and
women's organizations formed in response to gendered politics. Although the independent women's movement in Iran subsided, it continued to grow in Algeria. In a country where women's political activities were previously, and famously, conducted within a nationalist framework for the independence of the nation, the 1980s and 1990s saw Algerian women mobilized within a gender framework for the equality, autonomy, and empowerment of women, and for a democratic and non-fundamentalist Algeria. Meanwhile, independent women's organizations, including self-declared feminist groups, have proliferated throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Algerian women's groups have formed close ties to women's organizations in other Arab countries, especially elsewhere in North Africa; and they have received solidarity and support from feminist organizations in Europe and the USA, such as the networks Women Living Under Muslim Laws and Women, Law and Development International.

This article examines the rise of a feminist movement in Algeria and situates it in domestic, regional, and global developments. Algeria's post-Boumedienne restructuring and the crisis of the state, the rise of Islamism, and the regional and global expansion of feminism and of non-governmental organizations represent the context in which the emergence of a women's movement in Algeria can be understood. I begin with an overview of the relevant historical events in Algeria, followed by a detailed examination of the emergence of Algerian feminism and women's organizations in their two stages. In the final part, I link the emergence of Algerian feminist politics to global feminism, to the rise of Islamism and the changing political economy in the Middle East and North Africa, and to demographic changes favoring women's activism.

National Liberation, Patriarchy, and Women

The colonial and anti-colonial experience in Algeria has had a deep and abiding impact on national identity and on gender relations. For this reason, and in order to provide a historical background to my examination of the emergence of a feminist movement in Algeria, I begin with the French seizure of Algeria in 1830.

In contrast to their colonial policy in Morocco after 1912 and Tunisia after 1882, the French in Algeria sought to dismantle Islamic institutions, including the economic infrastructure and the Islamic cultural network of lodges and schools. By the turn of the century, there were upwards of half a million French-speaking settlers in Algeria, and by 1930 European competition had ruined most of the old artisan class. Small shopkeepers such as grocers and spice merchants survived, but others suffered severely from the competition of the petits colons. Industrialization in Algeria was given a low priority by Paris during the interwar period. Local development...
and employment-generation were severely hampered, and there was con-
siderable unemployment and male migration of the native population. Fierce economic competition, cultural disrespect, and residential segrega-
tion characterized the French administration (Metz, 1994).

In this context, many Algerians regarded Islam and the Muslim family as
sanctuaries from French cultural imperialism. The popular reaction to the
mission civilisatrice was a return to the land, religion, and family, the foun-
dations of the old community. To many Algerian men in particular, the
unveiled woman represented a capitulation to the European and his culture;
she was a person who had opened herself up to the prurient stares of the
foreigners, a person more vulnerable to (symbolic) rape. The protection and
seclusion of women were seen by Algerians as a necessary defense against
the French cultural onslaught (Knauss, 1987).

The anti-colonial movement and its political and military organizations
absorbed some of this thinking. When the Front de Libération Nationale
(FLN) and the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN) were formed, there
was no explicit provision for women to assume political or military responsi-
bilities. Nonetheless, military exigencies soon forced the officers of the ALN
to use some women combatants. Upwards of 10,000 women participated in
the Algerian revolution. The overwhelming majority of those who served
in the war were nurses, cooks, and laundresses. But many women played an
indispensable role as couriers, and because the French rarely searched
them, women were often used to carry bombs. Among the heroines of the
Algerian revolution were Djamila Bouhired (the first woman sentenced to
death), Djamila Bouazza, Jacqueline Gerroudj, Zahia Khalfallah, Baya
Hocine, and Dkoher Akrour. Women who fought and did not survive the
war of liberation included 20-year-old Hassiba Ben Bouali, killed in the
Casbah, and Djennet Hamidou, who was shot and killed as she tried to
escape arrest. She was 17. Yamina Abed, who was wounded in battle,
suffered amputation of both legs (Cherifati-Merabtine, 1995).

One emancipatory development during the national liberation struggle
was the admittance of unmarried women into the ranks of the FLN and
ALN and the emergence by default of voluntary unions unencumbered by
family arrangements, presided over by an FLN officer. (This was poignantly
depicted in a scene in Pontecorvo’s brilliant film Battle of Algiers.) Alya
Baffoun notes that during this ‘rather exceptional period of struggle for
national liberation’, the marriage of Djamila Bouhired to an ‘infidel’ non-
Muslim foreigner was accepted by her community (Baffoun, 1982: 234).¹

After independence, the September 1962 Constitution guaranteed equal-
ity between the sexes and granted women the right to vote. It also made
Islam the official state religion. Ten women were elected deputies of the new
National Assembly and one of them, Fatima Khemisti, drafted the only sig-
nificant legislation to affect the status of women passed after independence.
Intended to encourage more education for girls, the Khemisti law raised the
minimum age of marriage for girls to 16 (though the draft bill had originally stipulated age 19). In this optimistic time, when heroines of the revolution were being hailed throughout the country, the Union Nationale des Femmes Algériennes (UNFA) was formed. Indeed, one consequence of the Algerian revolution and of women’s role in it was the emergence of what Bouatta and Cherifati-Merabtine call the ‘moudjahidate model of womanhood’. The heroic woman fighter was an inspiration to the 1960s and 1970s generation of Algerians, particularly Algerian university women (Bouatta, 1995; see also Cherifati-Merabtine, 1995).

But another, more patriarchal tendency was at work during and after the revolution. One expression of this tendency was the pressure on women fighters during the liberation struggle to get married and thus prevent gossip about their behavior. Moreover, despite the incredible sacrifices of Algerian women, and although the female militants ‘acceded to the ranks of subjects of history’, the Algerian revolution was subsequently cast in terms of male exploits, and the heroic female feats did not receive as much attention (Bouatta, 1995).

Following independence, and in a display of authoritarianism, President Ben Bella proceeded to ban all political parties. The Federation of the FLN in France, which had advocated a secular state, had been dissolved; the new FLN general secretary, Mohammed Khider, had purged the radicals—who had insisted on the right of workers to strike—from the union’s leadership. And of women, Khider said:

The way of life of European women is incompatible with our traditions and our culture... We can only live by the Islamic morality. European women have no other preoccupations than the twist and Hollywood stars, and don’t even know the name of the president of their republic. (Quoted in Knauss, 1987: 99)

In a reversal of the political and cultural atmosphere of the national liberation struggle, exacerbated patriarchal values became hegemonic in independent Algeria. In this context, the marriage of another Algerian, Dalila, to a foreigner was deemed unacceptable. Dalila’s brother abducted and confined her ‘with the approving and silent consent of the enlightened elite and the politically powerful’ (Baffoun, 1982: 234).

Patriarchal socialism

Thus, notwithstanding the participation of upwards of 10,000 women in the Algerian revolution, their future status was already shaped by ‘the imperative needs of the male revolutionaries to restore Arabic as the primary language, Islam as the religion of the state, Algeria as a fully free and independent nation, and themselves as sovereigns of the family’ (Knauss, 1987: xiii). In the 1960s, Algerian marriage rates soared. In 1967 some 10 percent of Algerian girls were married at age 15; at age 20, 73 percent were married. The crude fertility rate was 6.5 children per woman. The
Boumedienne government’s policy on demographic growth was based on the belief that a large population was necessary for national power. It was, therefore, opposed to all forms of birth control unless the mother had already produced at least four children (Knauss, 1987: 111). By the end of the Boumedienne years in 1979, Algeria was home to a huge population of young people. Some 97 percent of Algerian women were without paid work, officially regarded as homemakers. While Algeria’s gender ideology favored domestic roles for women, patriarchal gender relations were reinforced by the economic situation of high male unemployment and underemployment, and the absence of a diversified economy or of labor-intensive industries. By this time, too, the UNFA had become the women’s auxiliary of the FLN, devoid of feminist objectives.

In the 1970s and the 1980s female candidates were elected to provincial and local assemblies and a few were appointed to ministerial and subministerial positions, but the Algerian political class was overwhelmingly male, and women were greatly under-represented in political decision-making positions. The Algerian professional class included women in such occupations as doctor, nurse, teacher, university professor, and—significantly—judge. But the vast majority of Algerian women were homemakers, did not take part in gainful employment, and had no access to economic resources or income. By the 1990s Algerian women aged 15–65 were only 8 percent of the labor force. This figure is not only extremely small by international standards, but it is also small by regional standards, and far below the female share of the labor force in neighboring Tunisia and Morocco (Moghadam, 1998: chs 3, 8).

The marginal involvement of women in employment requires some explanation. The reasons for the marginalization encompass methodological, economic, cultural, and demographic factors. First, the small size of the female labor force is partly a function of under-enumeration—women are not counted in the rural sector, and it is assumed by enumerators that there is no urban economic activity outside the formal sector. Second, the small size of the urban labor force and of women workers is a result of the fact that Algeria has been a major producer and exporter of oil and natural gas, an industrializing country that favored capital-intensive technologies deployed by men. Third, and as we saw above, Algeria entered the 1960s as a post-revolutionary country that had endured a traumatic movement for independence from France. The new leaders saw ‘the liberation of women from work’ and the expansion of the Muslim family within a Third World socialistic framework as a symbol of Algeria’s new national identity. Fourth, in a situation of high male unemployment and underemployment, women’s employment did not receive any official or social encouragement. And fifth, the very high birth rate in Algeria has tended to reduce the size of the employed population—male and female—while increasing the size of the dependent population.
On the positive side, state-sponsored education created a generation of Algerian women who would become a restive force for progressive social change in Algeria and create the new women’s movement. These were the women who loudly and visibly challenged the Chadli Bendjedid government’s conservative Family Code in 1981, who continued to protest after it was passed in 1984, and who confronted the Islamist movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The New Women’s Movement in Algeria

The Algerian women’s movement in its first stage emerged in the period following the December 1979 death of the long-time leader Colonel Houari Boumedienne. The immediate post-Boumedienne period was marked by a conservative move at women’s expense, in line with the shift away from Algerian socialism and towards a market economy, and in response to the growing Islamist tendency in the region. Just two months after Boumedienne’s death, the Ministry of Justice announced the creation of a commission to draft a Family Code. On 8 March 1979 some 200 university women convened an open meeting at the industrial workers’ union headquarters in Algiers to demand the disclosure of the identity of the members of the commission, and to express their concerns and demands. Significantly, they called themselves ‘the commission of women who work at the university’ and defined themselves as workers rather than as professionals, partly as a homage to the waning socialist heritage and partly to underscore their identity as employed women (Knauss, 1987: 130). In January 1980 the government of Chadli Bendjedid handed the embryonic feminist movement a new issue to protest against, when it abruptly prohibited Algerian women from leaving the country without guardian permission. According to Khalida Massaoudi, a math teacher and one of the organizers of the women’s protests, on 8 March 1980, ‘we organized a huge general assembly and decided to demonstrate in the streets, demanding that the order which hampered women’s freedom of movement be definitively lifted. The government retreated: the ministerial order was cancelled’ (Messaoudi and Schemla, 1995: 49). Messaoudi adds that at this time, when it became clear that the UNFA could or would do nothing to protest against the government, the first independent women’s collective was formed, consisting of about 50 women.

The introduction of the draft Family Code alarmed many middle-class Algerian women, who saw it as an attempt to placate a growing Islamist tendency by institutionalizing second-class citizenship for women. The 1981 proposal had offered six grounds for divorce on the part of the wife, allowed a woman to work outside the home after marriage if specified in the marriage contract or with the consent of her husband, and imposed some
restrictions on polygamy and the conditions in which the wives of a polygamous husband were kept. Algerian feminists responded quickly: ‘They gathered in front of the parliament building to reject the process of drawing up and adopting laws without a preliminary consultation of the most concerned’ (Bouatta, 1997: 5). The feminists joined with the moudjahidates—women veterans of the war of liberation—and demonstrated together on the 3 December 1981. On 21 January 1982, the group issued a six-point demand, calling for: monogamy; the unconditional right of women to seek employment; the equal division of family property; the same age of majority for women and men; identical conditions of divorce for men and women; and effective protection of abandoned children (Bouatta, 1997; see also Messaoudi and Schemla, 1995: 50).

The debate over the Family Code and the presence of the moudjahidates forced the government to withdraw its proposal, but an even more conservative revision was presented in 1984 and quickly passed by the National Assembly before much opposition could resurface.4 In the revised code, Algerian women lost their right to contract marriage—they now had to be given in marriage by a wali (guardian). Provisions for divorce initiated by women were sharply curtailed, as were the restrictions on polygamy; fathers became the sole guardians of children, and women were given an unequal share in inheritance. The only positive aspect of the new Family Code was that the minimum marriage age was increased for both women and men (to 18 and 21, respectively). Protests were again organized, but given the fact that the bill had already passed, they had little impact. Feminists point out that the Family Code contravenes the equality clauses of the Constitution, the Labor Code, and international conventions to which Algeria is a signatory (Bouatta, 1995; Cherifati-Merabtine, 1995).

In its first stage, during the early 1980s, Algeria’s feminist movement was preoccupied with the Family Code. Despite the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the growing influence of Islamism in Algeria, the new feminist movement did not focus its energies on fundamentalism. This occurred in the late 1980s. Still, the significance of this first cycle of women’s protests was clear. As Khalida Messaoudi puts it:

A part from the Berber cultural movement, it has been women—yes, women, and they alone—who have been publicly questioning the F.L.N. since 1980-81 and demanding that universal principles be enforced. Do you realize what holding four demonstrations in quick succession to demand freedom, equality, and citizenship represents in a country where no one talks about the Algerian personality except as something forged by Islam and Arabism? (Messaoudi and Schemla, 1995: 57)

Against fundamentalism and the Family Code

The Algerian feminist movement has its origins in this period of protest against the draft Family Code, and a number of new women’s groups were
formed. L’Association pour l’Égalité des Droits entre les Femmes et les Hommes (known as Égalité) was established in May 1985 around the Family Code struggle, with Khalida Messaoudi as its first president. Also prominent in the group was Louisa Hannoun, a Trotskyist and women’s rights activist. Cherifa Bouatta, a participant in the movement, succinctly summarizes the origins of Algerian feminism:

Under the shadow of the one-party system, the political monolith, some women attempted to create spaces of independent expression through cultural and trade union groups. Psychology students created a working group and a ciné-club. In Oran, study and reflection workshops on Algerian women were organized in early 1980, with contributions from historians, economists, sociologists and psychiatrists. The proceedings of these workshops were published and the organizers created a women’s journal ISIS. Other groups were then created, such as the moudjahidates collective and groups that studied and criticized official proposals for a new Family Code. This latter effort gave life to the women’s movement, and is indeed regarded as the spark that led to the emergence, the objective and the strategies of Algeria’s feminist movement. (Bouatta, 1997: 4)

The Bendjedid government was pursuing market reforms in addition to its adoption of a conservative family law. Austerity measures combined with political frustration directed at the FLN led to the riots of October 1988, in which young people played a prominent role. The riots in turn ushered in a brief period of political liberalization, which saw the increasing popularity of the Algerian Islamist movement that later called itself the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut). Algerian feminists were alarmed by statements emanating from Islamist leaders such as Ali Belhadj, who declared that ‘the natural place for a woman is at home’ and that ‘the woman is the reproducer of men. She does not produce material goods, but this essential thing that is a Muslim’ (cited in Mahl, 1998). Feminist groups were opposed to the electoral reforms that legalized religious-based parties such as the FIS, a legalization that contravened the Constitution. The leadership of the FIS proceeded to issue statements condemning the anti-fundamentalist women as ‘one of the greatest dangers threatening the destiny of Algeria’ and branding them ‘the avant-garde of colonialism and cultural aggression’ (Bennoune, 1995: 197).

Unfortunately, the fundamentalist discourse and agenda of the FIS were supported by a segment of the female population, and in April 1989 a demonstration of 100,000 women in favor of Islamism and sex-segregation shocked the anti-fundamentalist women. But this display also spawned a network of anti-fundamentalist feminist groups. When Égalité seemed to equivocate over the nature of the fundamentalist uprising, Khalida Messaoudi left to form another organization, l’Association pour le Triomphe des Droits des Femmes. In this second phase of the Algerian feminist movement, the struggle against fundamentalism took center stage.

The FIS was committed to introducing Sharia law, which it claimed was superior to western-style civil codes. Hijab would also be introduced,
ostensibly to free women from the prying eyes of men. According to one FIS leaflet: 'The hijab is a divine obligation for the Muslim woman: it is a simple and modest way to dress, which she has freely chosen.' How something can be an obligation and freely chosen is not explained. Other leaflets claimed that women are under attack from 'pernicious Westernization' and that 'a woman is above all a mother, a sister, a wife or a daughter'. Even the participation of women in sports was seen as immoral and corrupting. When Hassiba Boulmerka won the 1,500 meters at the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo in August 1991, becoming only the second Arab woman ever to receive a major sporting title, she was hailed by the Algerian sports minister, Leila Aaouabi, by President Chadli Bendjedid, and Prime Minister Sid Ahmed Ghozali, and by many of her compatriots. However, fundamentalist imams affiliated to the FIS united to pronounce kofr, a public disapproval of her from the nation's mosques. The object of their disapproval was the fact that Boulmerka had run before the world's eyes 'half-naked'—that is, in regulation running shorts and vest (Moghadam, 1993: 153).

To the government’s consternation the FIS made major electoral gains during the December 1991 parliamentary elections, and the government moved to annul the elections and ban the FIS. Chadli Bendjedid—now reviled by feminists and leftists—was removed in January 1992 and replaced by Mohamed Boudiaf, who opposed not only the fundamentalists but also corruption within the FLN. He was assassinated just five months later. In March 1992, when an Algerian court decided to ban the FIS, the court ruling was read by Judge Ziani, a woman judge who could not have held her position under a FIS government. The banning of the FIS was supported by many Algerian feminists, despite their distaste for the authoritarian government. Launching a second cycle of protests, Algerian feminists held demonstrations against the FIS and the establishment of an Islamic state. They had been alarmed when, during the latter part of the 1980s, the fundamentalists began to bully and attack women who lived alone or were unveiled. It was as if they were anticipating the terrorism that was to be carried out by the FIS and the GIA in the 1990s.

The cancellation of the election results was met with extreme violence, with much of the terror carried out by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). At the height of the political turmoil in the early 1990s pitting the government and military against Islamist extremists, Algeria’s economic and political transition appeared uncertain, and the state seemed on the verge of collapse. Algeria’s feminists were caught between the devil of statism and the deep blue sea of Islamism. While highly critical of the patriarchal and authoritarian state that had introduced the Family Code, they focused their political energies against misogynist and violent intégrisme, which they regarded as the harbinger of a fascistic theocracy. As Messaoudi put it, feminists and democrats reject ‘a state based on divine law’ and desire ‘a state based on rights’.7
Islamist terror

After shooting to death one young woman in April 1993 and decapitating a mother and a grandmother in separate incidents early the next year, the GIA issued a statement in March 1994 classifying all unveiled women who appeared in public as potential military targets—and promptly gunned down three teenaged girls (Bennoune, 1995). The violence against women escalated during that year, and included kidnappings and rapes. Women were denounced in mosques by imams and fatwas were pronounced against them, condemning women to death. Lists of women to be killed were pinned up at the entrance to mosques (Mahl, 1998). March 1995 saw an escalating number of deaths of women and girls. Khalida Messaoudi was officially condemned to death by the fundamentalists and was forced to live underground. Zizi Sadou, who had founded the Rassemblement Algérien des Femmes Démocratiques in 1993 and took public positions against theocracy and authoritarianism, was similarly put on an Islamist death list. Nabila Diahnine, an architect and president of the feminist group Cri de Femmes, was assassinated in February 1996 while on her way to work in the northern city of Tizi Ouzou (Gah, 1997). Women took to the streets to protest against the sexual violence and the threats against unveiled women, as well as the military government’s inability to protect women. After one public protest in the spring of 1994, the independent newspaper Al Watan wrote:

Tens of thousands of women were out to give an authoritative lesson on bravery and spirit to men paralyzed by fear, reduced to silence . . . The so-called weaker sex . . . refused to be intimidated by the threats advanced by ‘the sect of assassins’. (World Press Review, 1994).

General Liamine Zeroual, the country’s new president, committed himself to working with the opposition. Berber organizations and new democratic associations similarly condemned the terror while also protesting at the government’s incapacity. The outcome of the November 1995 elections showed that the government retained popular support. The government was again vindicated by the June 1997 general elections, though fewer people participated in these and there was much criticism of electoral rigging and government authoritarianism.

Throughout, Algerian feminists remained active and staunch opponents of Islamism and of terrorism. In a 1995 interview, while still living underground after her death sentence, Khalida Messaoudi’s courage and political acumen were in full display:

More than 80 people a day are being killed by Islamic fundamentalists . . . Intellectuals, teachers, writers, thinkers—these are the people killed because it is they who defend traditional notions of liberty. But sometimes simple citizens are killed, too, randomly, just for the purpose of terror. One day ordinary people may decide to say ‘No’ to the fundamentalists’ ambitions and they want to avoid that happening. They kill women who oppose their views of how we should behave. They cannot allow difference. That
is why they insist on veils to cover the difference. They are fascists who claim A Ilah is on their side and that they are marching under the banner of righteousness. . . . The Islamic movement is not an opposition to the Government; it is in fact the best way for the one-party state to reconstitute itself. That is not to say that the fundamentalists don’t have a popular base. After years of one-party rule people are desperate and many feel the FIS will make a difference. They [the FIS] just want to be the new dictatorship. If necessary they will compromise and absorb members of the FLN Government into their ranks. But it will simply be the old one-party state with a new face. (Swift, 1995)

Algerian women’s organizations

The period 1989–94 saw the formation of a number of active feminist organizations, including l’Association Indépendante pour le Triomphe des Droits de la Femme (Triomphe); l’Association pour l’Émancipation des Femmes (Émancipation); l’Association pour le Défense et Promotion des Femmes (Défense et Promotion); Rassemblement Algérien des Femmes Démocratiques; Cri de Femmes; Voix des Femmes; El Aurassia. The objectives of the Algerian women’s rights organizations include some that are fairly representative of the Middle East and North Africa region and others that are specific to the Algerian case: the abolition of the Family Code; full citizenship for women; enactment of civil laws guaranteeing equality between men and women in areas such as employment and marriage and divorce; abolition of polygamy and unilateral male divorce, equality in division of marital property. Since 1991 many of the feminists in these organizations have advanced the slogan ‘No dialogue with the fundamentalists’ (Mahl, 1998; see also Women, Law and Development Bulletin, 1998).

What are some of the activities and achievements of the women’s organizations? During the 1990s Égalité focused on information and awareness campaigns around the Family Code, with a view to mobilizing support for its abolition. It organized seminars on such themes as ‘democracy and the principle of equality’ and campaigned for political parties to defend women’s rights. It organized annual general assemblies and was said in 1995 to have around 500 members mostly between the ages of 35 and 40 (Bouatta, 1997). Triomphe likewise organized conferences around the Family Code as well as a series of workshops and lectures on the situation of women, and it published a legal guide for women. It had plans to produce magazines, a video library, films and theater performances about women; and to establish a laundromat as well as a multipurpose women’s center that included a documentation center and a nursery. In 1995 it was said to have about 200 members mostly between the ages of 25 and 40. Émancipation organized roundtables on subjects such as women’s employment and representations of women in textbooks; exhibitions of photographs and paintings; film debates. According to Bouatta, the membership numbered about 150 and consisted largely of the former members of the women’s cine-club, students, and workers. Défense et Promotion engaged in activities similar
to those of Égalité, Triomphe, and Émancipation: debates and conferences on the Family Code and campaigns for women’s legal awareness, cultural activities, workshops on women’s employment, and the promotion of goods made by women. In 1995 it had about 500 members mostly aged between 30 and 50 years.

Throughout the 1990s, these and other organizations participated in a variety of national and international independent initiatives on violence against women, including a March 1994 tribunal in Algeria ‘to judge symbolically the responsible Islamists and the former president of the A Igeria Republic for their crimes against humanity’. A ll the women’s groups built coalitions to organize street demonstrations in Algeria to defend democracy and the citizenship of women (Women, Law and Development Bulletin, 1998). The Rassemblement Algérien des Femmes Démocratiques (RAFD) has been very active in documenting human rights violations, particularly those by Islamists against women, and in collecting women’s testimonies. It produced a publication entitled Algérie réveille-toi, c’est l’an 2000!, a compilation of news articles about the atrocities, and also filed a civil action suit in Washington, D.C., against the FIS and its US representative, Anwar Haddam. The RAFD is part of the network Women Living Under Muslim Laws, and its founder, Zazi Sadou, received an award in 1997 from the US-based network Women, Law and Development International, in recognition of her work for Algerian women’s human rights.

Like other organizing women in the Middle East and North Africa, Algerian feminists are products of the country’s social development: they are urban employed women, mostly with higher education, although working-class women are also represented in the feminist organizations. Many Middle Eastern feminists (e.g. Iranian, Turkish, Palestinian) began as members of left-wing organizations, but what is distinctive about the Algerian women’s movement is the extent to which the women’s rights movement has been dominated by left-wing women. This may account for its audacity and organizational capability. When Égalité was formed in 1985, many of its officers and members were also associated with the Socialist Organization of Workers (OST, Trotskyist tendency). Many members of Émancipation belonged to the PST (Socialist Workers Party), and those of Défense et Promotion belonged largely to the PAGS (Parti de l’A vant-Garde Socialiste, or the Communist Party). As Bouatta explains:

The founding members of the women’s movement are, in their majority, influenced by the ideology of the Left. They all come from socialist parties. They are mostly academics, students, workers, and union representatives. They convey a message of an emancipatory project based on the equality of the sexes, employment and education, which are considered as the main criteria of women’s promotion and socialization. They matured under the shadow of the one-party system in its socialist phase. They are women of the post-independence who were fortunate to have access to education and training. They do not consider the day of liberation as very distant. They identify with
the moudjahidates whom they see as the first to have cracked the patriarchal system. (Bouatta, 1997: 15)

A Igerian women activists have been among the most trenchant critics of both government and fundamentalism. At the height of the Islamist terror, Saida Ben Habylas, the official Algerian representative to a UN-sponsored regional meeting that took place in A mman in November 1994, gave an impassioned speech denouncing the violence against women.8 In a newspaper interview, she boldly emphasized the complicity of both the state and the FIS:

The history of the FIS and other terrorist groups is a series of alliances with a corrupt ‘politico-financial mafia’ that helped bring about the economic and social inequalities in A Igeria during the 1970s and 1980s . . . Political pluralism and democracy could have meant exposure of corruption of the old order. This old order allied themselves with the FIS in the 1980s and agreed to ‘share power’. There was a deal. (Cited in Bennoune, 1995: 194)

Notwithstanding the disruptive nature of A Igeria’s economic and political crisis, it seems to have given new life to the incipient civil society. In 1989 the legalization of political parties resulted in a large number of independent interest groups emerging as political parties, ‘attesting to the pervasive nature of associational life in A Igerian political culture’ (Entelis and Arone, 1994: 211). The government has had to tolerate, respond to, and interact with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The conciliatory stance of the state, and the cracks in the unity of the political elite, have favored the proliferation of NGOs. Layachi describes how interaction between the state and elements of the nascent civil society intensified after 1993, and he lists those non-government organizations, professional associations, and parties that were represented in meetings with the High State Council (Layachi, 1995). Missing from the list is the array of women’s organizations that emerged in A Igeria during the 1980s and 1990s. According to Bouatta, there were 20 women’s associations at the first national meeting of women in late 1989 and in 1993 perhaps as many as 24, according to the author of a document published by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities that year. These included women’s studies and research associations such as Aicha, Dafatir Nissiya, and Fondation Nyssa; feminist organizations such as those mentioned above; women-in-development organizations such as Femmes, Environnement, Développement; social-professional associations such as SEVE which seek to promote and assist women in business, and a number of service and delivery organizations such as SOS Femmes en Détresse. Ever since the struggle around the Family Code, and especially since the onslaught of fundamentalism, the growth of feminist activism and of women’s organizations has become a defining feature of A Igeria in transition.

Not only is the new women’s movement one of the principal social movements in contemporary A Igeria, but A Igerian feminists are becoming more
visible and more prominent in the established political structures. Indeed, the most interesting outcome of the 1997 municipal and parliamentary elections was the election of 11 women to the National Assembly, among them several well-known activists and feminists. As mentioned earlier, there has always been representation of women in state bodies; the numbers of women, however, have always been very limited, and the elected or appointed women were from the ruling party, the FLN. The emergence of a feminist politics critical of both fundamentalism and the state has altered the composition and orientation of the newly elected women. Among them are Louisa Hannoun, leader of the Workers Party, Khalida Messaoudi, now of the Rally for Culture and Democracy, and Dalia Taleb of the Socialist Forces Front. All three women are known for their radicalism. Indeed, Hannoun was dubbed ‘Algeria’s shining star’ by the Algerian press, which also deemed her one of the only ‘two real men’ in Algeria—the other being the recently released former leader of the FIS, Abassi Madani (Danesh, 1997: 10). Alongside Algeria’s political tragedies are the paradoxes and ironies of gendered politics, including the designation of women activists as ‘men’.10

A Algerian Feminism in Global and Regional Perspective

The new women’s movement in Algeria coincides with the emergence of feminism and of women’s organizations throughout the Middle East and North Africa. At the same time, what may be called a ‘global political opportunity structure’ has allowed for the formation and proliferation of NGOs and of women’s organizations in Algeria and in the rest of the region.11 In this section I provide an explanatory framework for the rise of Algerian feminism that takes into account the global and regional dynamics of feminist organizing at one level of analysis, and at another level of analysis, situates the impetus for ‘female revolt’ and opportunities for gender-based mobilization in demographic, economic, and political developments that occur in domestic settings.

The global context

Women’s organizations form part of the proliferation of NGOs around the world. The expansion of NGOs is a function of a global trend that gained momentum in the 1980s, when donor governments and multilateral funding agencies embraced NGOs as partners in development (Edwards and Hulme, 1992). The change in the development agenda away from a pre-occupation with economic issues towards an emphasis on political and institutional development, as well as the emergence of a ‘global civil society’ through what are called transnational social movement organizations or
transnational advocacy networks, has elevated issues of human rights, good governance, participation, the environment, and gender to a new prominence (see Boli and Thomas, 1997; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Smith et al., 1997). Among the most significant of the transnational advocacy networks or global social movements is the women’s movement and its organizations around the world.

United Nations conferences on women and other international conferences have provided space, legitimacy, and funding for women’s rights and human rights organizations, as well as other types of NGOs. The groundwork was laid by the UN Decade for Women that began in 1975, and especially the Nairobi Conference in 1985, during which time women’s organizations proliferated throughout the world to defend and extend women’s rights and advancement. In the 1990s, opportunities for growth were afforded by the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (held in Rio de Janeiro in 1991), the International Conference on Human Rights, and especially the Women’s Tribunal (held in Vienna in 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (held in Cairo in 1994), the World Summit for Social Development (held in Copenhagen in March 1995), and the Fourth World Conference on Women (held in Beijing in 1995). Taken together, these international conferences have engendered what may be called ‘global feminism’.

Global feminism may be defined as ‘the discourse and movement of women aimed at advancing the status of women (through greater access to resources, through legal measures to effect gender equality, and through the self-empowerment of women) within national boundaries but through transnational forms of organizing and mobilizing’ (Moghadam, 1996). Global feminism is predicated upon the notion that notwithstanding cultural, class, and ideological differences among the women of the world, there is a certain commonality in the forms of women’s disadvantage and in the forms of women’s organizations worldwide. These organizations are increasingly networking and coordinating their activities, engaging in dialogue and forms of cooperation and mutual support, sending representatives to meetings in other countries and regions, and utilizing a similar vocabulary to describe women’s oppression and the desired alternatives. A vivid demonstration of ‘global feminism on the ground’ was the myriad of preparatory activities around the world for the Fourth World Conference on Women, and of course the participation of numerous women’s NGOs at the conference itself. Indeed, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action may be regarded as the manifesto of global feminism (Moghadam, 1996: 115).

Another global factor conducive to the growth of women’s organizations in Algeria and in the region has been the increased understanding and cooperation between feminists in developing countries and in developed countries. Global feminism is exemplified by the close connections among
Transnational feminist networks such as DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), WIDE (Women in Development Europe), WLUML (Women Living Under Muslim Laws), SIGI (the Sisterhood is Global Institute), WLD (Women, Law, and Development International) and many others. SIGI and WLUML in particular have close links to feminist and anti-fundamentalist women’s groups in the Middle East and North Africa. Algerian feminist groups have received different kinds of support from feminist groups in France, Italy, and the USA. In 1997, Rhonda Copelon, director of the International Human Rights Law Clinic at the City University of New York and a well-known international women’s rights activist lawyer, filed a suit in the USA on behalf of Algerian women victims of terror, and the RAFD. As mentioned above, the defendants were the FIS and Anwar Haddam, the so-called ‘representative-in-exile’ of the FIS in the USA (Flanders, 1998; Kirshenbaum, 1998).

The regional context

Non-governmental organizations in the Middle East and North Africa have taken advantage of the global political opportunity structure to proliferate, extend their activities, criticize policies, and disseminate their views on development, the environment, human rights, and other issues. Women’s organizations have done the same, and they are increasingly working together in the pursuit of common goals.

Not all women’s organizations in the region are explicitly feminist. Some eschew the label while others welcome it. However, if we use a broad definition of feminism to include all organizations working towards women’s equality and empowerment, then most of the non-Islamic women’s NGOs are ipso facto feminist. And what are the different types of women’s organizations in the region? I have analyzed lists and descriptions of the many organizations that have emerged and classified them according to their stated orientations and strategies. My analysis suggests a sevenfold typology: (1) service organizations are the oldest type; they include charitable organizations and they have a largely ‘welfare’ approach; (2) professional associations seek equity for their members within the profession and the society; many of their members are feminists who are also members of human rights or women’s rights organizations; (3) women’s organizations affiliated to political parties are the women’s affiliates of non-ruling political parties, and they are usually left-wing; (4) worker-based and grassroots women’s organizations are concerned with the welfare and equity of women workers and seek to empower women as workers. As such they are oriented towards meeting the practical needs of women workers rather than any explicitly feminist goals; (5) development and women-in-development NGOs provide technical assistance and expertise on issues related to sustainable development, and implement projects on income-generation and
micro-enterprises for poverty-alleviation, literacy and education, health, family planning, and community development; in the current lexicon they seek economic empowerment for women, though not necessarily within a feminist frame; (6) development research centers and women's studies institutes are usually national-based but are increasingly conducting transnational research activities, especially in North Africa; they sometimes engage in feminist activism, and feminists may be found among their staff; (7) human rights/women's rights organizations are the ones with the most transformative potential, the ones most likely to experience state harassment, and the ones where feminist goals are most explicit (Moghadam, 1998: ch. 9).

Are there signs of cooperation among the different kinds of women's organizations? Many women tend to be active in two or more of the organizations described above; personal networks among the women active in the various organizations assure the women's movement a certain coherence.

The Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), based in Tunis but acting as a regional body, undertakes regional training, research, information and communication programs, and advisory services on issues related to women, family, and development.

North Africa is home to many independent women's rights and human rights organizations. Many came together to form the Collectif 95 Maghreb Égalité, which was the major organizer behind the 'Muslim Women's Parliament' at the NGO Forum which preceded the Beijing Conference. Among its many activities, the Collectif has formulated an alternative 'egalitarian family code'. Social rights are also on the agenda. In Morocco in 1995, a roundtable on the Rights of Workers was organized by the Democratic League of Women's Rights, and a committee structure was subsequently formed, consisting of 12 participating organizations. The objective was the revision of the labor code to take account of women's conditions, to include domestic workers in the definition of wage-workers and the delineation of rights and benefits, to set the minimum work age at 15, and to provide workers on maternity leave with full salary and a job-back guarantee.

The women's organizations I have described and classified above are found in most countries of the region; they also send representatives to meetings in the region and engage in various forms of transnational activity. Indeed, in early November 1994, Amman, Jordan, was the venue of a regional conference of Arab women's NGOs, as part of the preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women (which took place in Beijing in September 1995). The two-week deliberations resulted in a document entitled 'Work Program for the Non-Government Organizations in the Arab Region.' This document expresses the priority issues of Arab women's NGOs, and these include political, legal, and economic issues. At the final preparatory conference in New York in March 1995, the following priorities were delineated by the women's NGOs:
• To strengthen the basis of the democratic process in both the political and social realms; to ensure the sanctity of human rights and the amendments of legislation that target the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women, in particular, family laws.
• To condemn fundamentalism and cultural extremism, which can lead to terrorism and violence against women.
• To promote social development to counteract the negative impact of applied structural adjustment programs and to ensure the basic human needs of women.

Explaining women’s organizations
Understanding how and why Arab women, and Algerian feminists, have been formulating and articulating such demands requires an appreciation of a number of key developments within and across societies in the region, and which may be summarized as demographic, political, and economic.

Demographic factors. The growth of an educated female population in urban areas and the entry of women into paid labor constitute the most salient demographic factors in the capacity of women to organize and mobilize. The age of first marriage for women is rising in all countries (it is now 24 in Tunisia, for example), and family size is decreasing for educated and employed women. As women’s educational attainment increases, so does their participation in the paid labor force, which has been growing since the 1980s (see Moghadam, 1993: ch. 2; 1998: ch. 2). Such demographic changes are giving these ‘modernizing women’ more time for other public activities, and allowing them to make demands on governments for equality, autonomy, and empowerment. At the same time, increasingly large populations are now concentrated in cities; urbanization and population growth have created pressures for social services as well as opportunities for collective action.

Economic factors. The reduction or inefficiency of public spending in the areas of health, education, and social welfare, and state failures in areas such as female illiteracy, reproductive health, and legal reforms have spurred NGOs into action and focused women’s attentions on the links between the development agenda and the status and welfare of women. Like governments almost everywhere, Middle Eastern and North African governments have adopted the neoliberal economic policy agenda, and many have instituted structural adjustment policies under the auspices of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These policies call for, among other things, privatization, the phasing out of subsidies, the liberalization of prices, and the introduction of ‘user fees’ in education and healthcare. These policies have created hardships for working people and the poor, and in a
number of countries in the region, inequalities and relative poverty have increased. The neoliberal policy agenda thus necessitates non-governmental public action. To compensate for state inaction, or to act as ‘partners in development’, NGOs, including women’s NGOs, provide health, educational, and social services and cater to the basic needs of local communities. Like women’s groups in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, Arab women’s groups have been very critical of structural adjustment, and this criticism has been aired in many of the publications of women’s groups.

Political factors. As we have seen in the case of Algeria, women’s organizations have formed in the context of two parallel political developments: the rise and spread of Islamic fundamentalism, and the growth of a movement for democratization. Many feminist groups have formed in opposition to Islamism, the failure of states to confront it (or indeed state collusion with the movements), and the conservative revision of Personal Status Codes or Family Laws. In some cases, the state allows a measure of independent organizing either because it is preoccupied with crises or it has an interest in appearing democratic or liberal (e.g. Algeria, Tunisia, Turkey, Egypt). Meanwhile, Islamic organizations in various countries have taken advantage of the global political opportunity structure and the regional movement for liberalization and democratization to push for their own ‘rights’ (though they in fact have many rights, privileges, and institutional, human, and financial resources which most secular groups do not enjoy). Whether or not Islamic NGOs contribute to the democratization process is difficult to resolve, but there is less ambivalence with respect to the ways that human rights organizations and women’s organizations are contributing to the emergence of a civil society. Indeed, in Turkey, some have argued that the women’s movement contributed to the process of democratization in the 1980s (Arat, 1994a, 1994b). An important conclusion about the new women’s movement in Algeria concerns its role in societal democratization and modernization. That is, not only are women’s organizations in Algeria (and elsewhere) significant because of the historic exclusion of women from public forms of power, but these organizations are transforming state-society relations and pushing the boundaries of citizenship.

Conclusions

The global political opportunity structure, the regional context of Islamism, economic restructuring, and the growth of a cohort of educated, employed, mobile, and politically conscious women—these are the main factors that explain the rise and expansion of feminism and women’s organizations in countries of the Middle East and North Africa, including Algeria. Among the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, Algeria is one
of the most instructive case studies of feminist activism. Although women played prominent roles in the Algerian national liberation movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the rise of a radical women's movement and of feminist organizations has been a feature of the 1980s and 1990s. The new women's movement in Algeria emerged in the context of the global and regional dynamics described in the previous section: a growing international women's movement, economic crisis and restructuring, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the weakness of the state, and the emergence of a stratum of educated and employed Algerian women with social and gender consciousness. During this period a number of women's rights organizations were formed, first in response to the government's attempt to institute a conservative family law, and then in response to the power of the Islamist movement, its growing violence, and the threat it posed to women. Algerian feminists have advanced powerful critiques of patriarchy and authoritarianism, whether of the state or of Islamic fundamentalism. As such, Algerian feminism and the new women's organizations are an integral part of the democratic movement that gained momentum in the 1990s. They constitute a significant part of the emergent civil society, and they give new meaning to concepts of citizenship, human rights, and political participation.

NOTES
1. Djamila Bouhired married Jacques Vergès, the French lawyer who specializes in political trials.
2. In 1987, women were only 3.3 percent of those at the ministerial level of government, and 0.0 percent at the subministerial level. At the national assembly they constituted only 2 percent. These figures increased in 1994 but were still low: 7 percent of parliamentarians, 7.7 percent of those at the subministerial level of government, and 3.6 percent of ministerial level positions. See United Nations (1995: table 14, p. 172).
3. In 1990, 20 percent of university professors were female in Algeria. Women were also about half the teaching force at lower levels. Even so, Algerian women's educational attainment has not been significant, given the country's past wealth. As recently as 1990, nearly 80 percent of women above the age of 25 were illiterate (compared with 50 percent of the men 25 years and older). At lower age groups the figures are better, but even so, fully 37.8 percent of young women aged 15–24 were illiterate in 1990 (compared with only 13.8 for men). See United Nations (1995: table 7, p. 100). Khalida Messaoudi, the Algerian feminist activist, has noted that in postcolonial Algeria, education was free but not compulsory (Messaoudi and Schelma, 1995: 30). The same book contains a fascinating description of the travails of education in Algeria during the 1970s, when the program of Arabization was first implemented through the importation of teachers from Egypt, Syria, and Iraq—not all of whom were competent in their subject-areas. See the discussions in chs 4 and 7.

5. The Bendjedid government also encouraged—or at least, turned a blind eye to—the participation of young Algerian men in the Mujahideen movement in Afghanistan, where Islamists were waging a war against the Soviet-backed government in the 1980s. It is said that many members of the FIS and the GIA were Islamist volunteers in Afghanistan.

6. One of the groups that formed at the time was the National Committee Against Torture, of which Khalida Messaoudi was a member. See the discussion in Messaoudi and Schemla, 1995: ch. 8.

7. Messaoudi and Schemla (1995: 142). There is no doubt that the Algerian government has carried out its own killings of suspects, real or imagined. But the available evidence suggests that the terror was initially launched by the FIS. Indeed, the roots of Islamist terror may be traced back to Mustafa Bouyali’s Armed Islamic Algerian Movement, which for five years led violent attacks on the representatives of the state in the first half of the 1980s (see Malley, 1996: 245). For details on the misogyny, anti-Semitism and anti-democratic statements of the FIS, see Messaoudi and Schemla, 1995: chs 9–11. On the killings, kidnappings and rapes of women during the 1990s, see also Flanders (1998: 24–7). Finally, as to whether the FIS was ‘forced’ into the position it took because its victory had been stolen, it is well to compare its response to that of Turkey’s Islamic Refah Party years later. When the Refah Party was declared dissolved by the Turkish military in 1998, the leadership chose a non-violent and political response: to regroup under another name. In any event, the vicious verbal and physical attacks on women and girls carried out by the FIS and GIA—as well as the killings of journalists, foreigners, and priests and nuns—cannot be justified.


9. The Workers Party is Trotskyist. The RCD is led by Said Sadi, and Khalida Messaoudi is its official representative. Its goals are ‘secularism, citizenship, a state based on rights, the repeal of the Family Code, recognition of Algeria’s Berber dimension, social justice, educational reform, etc.’ (Messaoudi and Schemla, 1995: 94). The Socialist Forces Front, led by Ait Ahmed, is also for democracy and Berber rights.

10. For many years the Algerian women’s movement was unified in its condemnation of fundamentalists, but some cracks have appeared since ‘normalization’ and during the presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Louisa Hannoun’s tendency to placate the Islamic opposition has irked many Algerian feminists, as has Khalida Messaoudi’s assumption of the position of adviser to the president. According to two Algerian feminists, this has compromised Messaoudi’s independence (personal communications, Limassol, Cyprus, July 2000 and Vienna, Austria, Oct. 2000).

11. Political opportunity structure (POS) is a key element of social movement analysis. Other key elements are mobilizing structures (the capacity to mobilize financial and human resources and build organizations), and framing processes (the interpretive, cultural, discursive, and symbolic aspects of movement-building). See McAdam et al., 1996.
12. My observations at the NGO Forum in Huairou and discussions with participants. See also their documents: Collectif 95 Maghreb Égalité (1995a, 1995b).

13. I attended the expert-group and high-level meetings that followed the NGO conference at the invitation of ESCWA, and was able to obtain a copy of the (unedited) NGO document in English translation.

14. Demographic factors have been identified as important by a number of scholars who have studied women’s organizations. See, for example, Chafetz and Dworkin (1986); see also Margolis (1993).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dr Valentine Moghadam is Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Women’s Studies Program at the Illinois State University, Normal. She is the author of numerous articles, two books: Women, Work, and Economic Reform in the Middle East and North Africa, 1998, and Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East, 1993; and several edited collections, among them, Patriarchy and Economic Development: Women’s Positions at the End of the Twentieth Century (1996); Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective (1994); and Democratic Reform and the Position of Women in Transitional Economies (1993). Address: Director, Women’s Studies Program, Campus Box 4260, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 6179-4260, USA. [email: vmmogha@ilstu.edu]