TWO

Crossing the Street

Gendered Lives from the Maghreb to France

As other authors note, "[s]tudies about immigration and post-colonial society in France tend to ignore or marginalize the gendered nature of their subject" (Freedman and Tarr 2000:1).[1] Gender affects how people are socialized, how they are treated, and how they view themselves. Pyke and Johnson (2003:34) note that more attention needs to be paid to how racial and ethnic minority women "mediate cross-pressures in the production of femininity as they move between mainstream and ethnic arenas, such as family, work, and school." In this chapter, I examine how assumptions about gender learned in the home country are called into question upon arrival in a new country, and how immigrant women who "do" gender the French way derive unexpected benefits compared with immigrant men (West and Zimmerman 1987). I begin with background on how gender conditions women's lives growing up in the Maghreb. I then explore how being female impacts respondents' experiences of immigration to and life in France.

Female in the Maghreb

RESPONSIBILITIES AND RESTRAINTS

The way girls are raised in North Africa depends on several factors, both within the particular family and without, that result from historical and sociocultural forces. Camille Lacoste-Dujardin (2004a:120) writes that "in Algeria for example, the transmutations stemming from the war of independence, in conjunction with the decline in agriculture, the rate of emigration, and the moving of populations, have led to great changes in family structures that now reveal a rather large variety." At the same time, however, she maintains that "[t]he weight of patriarchal representations and lineage has not been lifted and, in Maghrebin families, people still live, with only a few exceptions, under the power of the honor of the lineage and paternal (patriarchal) authority" (122).

In general, there were two patterns of upbringing for the participants. First, girls who grew up in rural areas with uneducated, traditional parents were often expected to help with household tasks, even at the expense of their schooling. Many of these girls only went to school briefly, and several, especially first-born girls, never went to school at all. Occasionally girls who managed to do well in school were allowed to continue as long as they also consistently met their familial obligations. This was true of Hayat (32-year-old Algerian), who was one of the first girls in her village to attend school, and whose father threatened every year, starting in junior high, that this would be her last year of school:

> *H:* They did everything to make me stay at home, for me to get married, to not continue my studies. I wasn't helped. Not at all. Even when I went to school, I got home at 6:00, at 6:00, I had to make dinner for my brothers and sisters, because I had a lot of brothers and sisters.
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> *CK:* You were the eldest?
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> *H:* Yes, unfortunately for me. And a girl. The oldest girl in a Maghrebin family. Honestly, it's no piece of cake.

Hayat's mother argued that because her daughter excelled in school, she should be allowed to continue, so Hayat was able to pass her baccalaureate despite her father's objections. Other mothers were happy to have the eldest daughter at home all day to aid in child care and cooking, and some parents

forbade schooling for girls altogether. When asked if she had ever attended school, Fatima (54-year-old Moroccan) answered, "Oh no, never, never, never. Because girls where I come from, they say we have to stay at home and get married, and her husband will work for her. She doesn't need to go to school."

Girls with educated parents, many of whom were raised in large cities, experienced a second pattern. They were expected to go to school, often through college. Even these girls, though, were frequently required to do household chores, including cooking and cleaning, that their brothers were never expected to do. Only in one family were boys also expected to make their beds and do the family's dishes. Women noted that even an educated woman needs to know how to cook and clean in order to be a good wife. As Deha pointed out, "It's clear that when you get married, you have to know how to cook, that's the side, a girl knows how to cook, how to wash. It's clear that a girl who went to medical school, it's very important that she have a diploma so that she can be married, she can be married well, but that she knows how to cook and take care of her man, that's very important." Deha also makes an interesting observation that because girls are trained to be responsible for household tasks at an early age, they carry this sense of work and responsibility through school and into the labor market. Currently, more Algerian girls than boys are passing the baccalaureate and finding jobs, and Deha attributes the successes of girls to their stricter upbringing, which encourages responsibility.

Although differences in upbringing and expectations for girls in the Maghreb differ by region, class, education, and parental beliefs, virtually all the respondents had constraints placed on their movement and their sexuality. In some rural areas, North African women leave their homes only to visit family members, attend to sick relatives and neighbors, and attend weddings. Although some of these women make extra income for the family, they do so by working in their own gardens and fields or, most frequently, by sewing or weaving goods that will be sold. Men do most of the chores that involve going beyond the home, often including the shopping. The story is very different in urban areas where more women work outside the home, but girls find from a young age that the spaces in which they can be seen are limited. Even when parents allow girls to go out for purposes other than school and work, access to public places is greatly restricted. As Mernissi (1996:167) points out, "[s]treets are spaces of sin and temptation because they are both

public and sex-mixed." Girls rarely attend movies and are often unwelcome in cafés. The boundaries are maintained by looks of disapproval and sometimes by harassment of women who test the limits. These limitations become internalized. Participants frequently said that smoking, drinking, talking to boys, going to movies, and being out after 6:00 PM are acts that are disapproved of and can cause women to develop bad reputations. Even women who go to cafés, drink, and smoke restrict these behaviors in certain situations. Besma is a 34-year-old from Tunisia, where constraints on urban women are more lax than in most of the Maghreb. Even so, she will not eat pork there and is careful about who sees her drink and where she smokes:

> In my town, I don't go to the restaurants in my town because everybody knows me. I don't like, um, I don't want to be, to have it repeated everywhere and to have them stick a label on me that doesn't match anything really. Because they're going to think of you like a prostitute if you drink. It's ridiculous. But, well, I'll smoke, I'll smoke on the other hand, if I show it, when I'm in a café, in restaurants, I don't have a problem, I smoke. I don't have issues with smoking over there. But, on the other hand, we don't smoke in the street there. Women don't smoke in the streets. No woman does it, so I don't do it. But in public places, restaurants and such, everybody smokes, it's not forbidden, and I don't hide it. But with alcohol, I'm a little more discreet because I don't want problems for nothing.

Many of the restrictions on women are efforts to control their sexuality. A girl who loses her virginity before marriage is viewed as "lost" and can bring shame to her entire family. As Besma made clear, behaviors such as drinking in public or smoking on the street become linked with perceptions of loose sexual morals, and consequently many women avoid these behaviors. The emphasis on virginity remains strong, even for those women with the most "tolerant" parents. Respondents who praised their parents for allowing them to go out in mixed-sex groups still mentioned that the one rule was that they remain virgins. Labiba's parents were very permissive: "I was allowed to go out at night, for example, to sleep out. All along saying, 'Okay, but you have to keep your virginity.' That's the ultimatum." The majority of parents were much more strict. Many would not let their daughters attend even school-sponsored activities after school, and some were opposed to sports and any traveling for girls for fear of losing control over their sexuality. Leila (43-year-old Tunisian) said that growing up in rural Tunisia attending

movies, visiting a different town, and participating in sports were all looked upon negatively for girls, "because a girl's virginity constitutes the honor of the family. It's the honor of the family that's riding on it, so if the girl loses her virginity, the family has lost its honor. And still today that mentality exists there. It hasn't changed at all, I think."[2] Nour (34-year-old Algerian) remembers with pain that her grandmother told her to quit horseback riding as a child because otherwise she would lose her virginity.

Like restrictions on movement and visibility in public spaces, women internalized messages about their sexuality and were reticent to go too far. Leila explains,

> When we arrive at the problem of intimate relations between a man and a woman, or having a sexual life before marriage, there I was, um, I got blocked. I repeated what my mother told me, really, I said, "No, a girl who is not married, she's not allowed to sleep with a man" . . . and that's because, well, for us it was the worst thing that could happen to a girl. A girl who's not married and who sleeps with a boy, it's really, it's a prostitute, it's not a girl worth anything. So I never could, I couldn't go to bed with my fiancé before the wedding. I never could, and that's in the education.

Nour, in particular, talked at length about how her sexuality and feelings about her body were affected by growing up in Algeria, even though her mother was Dutch.

> So even in my sexuality, and it's important, I was stuck, you see, by my role as a woman who couldn't have a normal sexuality without guilt. I felt very, very young the way men looked at women in my society. It's a view that's not healthy, you see? And I felt it very, very young. I have a memory really young, six or seven, when a man kissed me by force at the pool, and it traumatized me. And I didn't tell anyone because I already felt guilty, you know what I mean? And it continued that way really. We couldn't have a boyfriend normally. I grew up in an Algerian school, in an Algerian society, even though I was a little different having a Dutch mother and everything, but that weighed on me. The gaze of men weighed on me. The gaze of my teachers, male. I remember that we had a civics and religion teacher who was supposed to teach us good manners and everything, and who openly tried to pick up girls. We were in sixth grade! A friend of mine, in class, like a dirty old man. And that, that can go on in other countries, but I felt it in Algeria where women aren't necessarily free to do what they want. And that

> really affected me. . . . [I wanted] to be able to be a woman without others seeing me as a piece of meat. You see? And that was a fight with my male friends in Algeria. And today finally they've accepted me as a friend, and not as a potential wife or a good lay, to speak crudely. And it was really a battle to talk with them and make them understand that there's something more, that, that the woman is not just for sex, but can be a friend. Because in our society, the sexes are separated really early.

Nour goes on to say that she is still not comfortable with her body, but notes that there are Algerian women who feel better about themselves than she does. Indeed, not all women eschewed sexuality before marriage. Respondents talked of girls who found ways to get around the virginity problem. These include having the hymen sewed back together before marriage and engaging in anal sex in order to protect one's "virginity." Deha was open about bucking constraints on her sexuality. At sixteen, she asked a classmate to help her lose her virginity because she wanted to be free of it. At seventeen, she moved out of her parents' house, a move sure to bring shame to an unmarried girl, because even divorced women in Algeria are not supposed to live alone but return home to their parents. She admits she wanted to provoke people and particularly enjoyed having sex on the beach during the month of Ramadan, a taboo, when everyone else was indoors breaking the fast. Yet even Deha was unable to be as free about her sexuality as she would have liked: "My husband and I got married because we had to get married since we lived in a house where we couldn't live as a couple, and so we did it as if it were a duty . . . and there was our son who was going to be born nine months later." Thus wanting to live with her boyfriend and the knowledge of a baby on the way rerouted Deha's sexual freedom back into traditional channels in spite of herself.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY MEMBERS

Traditional sexuality is sexuality in marriage, and most North African girls defined themselves around this event. As unmarried children and adolescents, they were under the control of their fathers and often their brothers, who saw themselves as responsible for protecting the family or larger kin group's honor (Charrad 2001).[3] According to Joseph (1996:199), "[t]he notion of family honor facilitates patriarchal power by circumscribing women's sexual-

ity, movement in social arenas, and to some degree, economic opportunities. It enhances the power of fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and male cousins over women."

The amount of control varies by family, but even in tolerant families, girls often found that their relationships with male family members were conflicted. Fathers usually made the final decisions about school and other activities, and women who were well educated often reached a point where they resisted, challenging their father's decisions and differential treatment of their brothers. Sometimes accumulated grievances were subsumed and expressed in one rebellious symbolic act, such as smoking. In the Maghreb, even boys often refrain from smoking in front of their fathers, a behavior seen as a sign of disrespect. Nour's brothers did smoke in front of their father, and even though Nour did not smoke, she lit up a cigarette in front of her father to test his fair treatment of girls and boys. Malika's painful relationship with her father epitomizes many of the struggles participants voiced. She, too, argued with her father about smoking as a pretext for deeper problems:

> Smoke. Yes. I don't smoke in front of him, and my last big fight with him was about cigarettes. Because one day I was there on vacation, and he saw a pack of cigarettes . . . in my room, and he said, "I don't want you to smoke." . . . So it was a big crisis between us. . . . I smoke one or two cigarettes a day, and it's not his business. As long as I don't do it in front of him, where I wasn't provoking, or in front of anyone. . . . I don't see why he has to get mixed up in it. So we had a big discussion that night, but he said that I didn't respect him, and that anyway I did what I wanted, and that if his opinion counted so little for me, then it wasn't worth him talking to me. And he didn't talk to me during the whole time I was there, and for two years I came and he didn't talk to me. . . . But I think that this fight between us about cigarettes, cigarettes were a pretext, but they were symptomatic of everything. Yes, of everything. Because he is someone who always had a really hard time talking . . . he doesn't know how to express his feelings, so he's rather violent. He's going to explode or he's not going to say anything. . . . So he wanted to tell me something. He wanted to tell me that he understood or didn't understand, or he felt me slipping away from him. . . . I think he wanted to tell me, "I know you're getting away, and I have no way to stop you," that's it. "And until the last moment, I'm trying to hold onto the last little thing." . . . I asked him to accept enormous things for him, and

> he wasn't brought up to accept all that. He wasn't conditioned, um, to see his daughter grow that way. He wasn't prepared for it. . . . Like all men, I think, he wakes up saying, "Oh really? It's like that?" I think it's true for all men everywhere in the world, maybe Arab men more, I don't know, I don't have an opinion on that, but all of a sudden it's too much. I think I'm too much for him, too much. So he's proud of me, but at the same time, sometimes, it poses a lot of problems for him. Had I been a boy, it would have been perfect. He could have been proud without any problem. Now he's proud, but it's difficult for him.

Traditional rules of decency regulating interactions between the sexes and different generations hinder the ability of fathers to communicate openly with their daughters (Lacoste-Dujardin 2000, 2004a). When Malika and Nour rebelled, both their fathers stopped speaking to them. The pattern of conflict avoidance sometimes went both ways. Many women did not or could not challenge their fathers, and some continued to try to meet their family's expectations, or at least pretend to, often even while living in France. Keltouma's (35-year-old Moroccan) story about her father's visit reveals the ambivalence that even independent women in their 30s feel about upsetting their father's notion of how girls should behave. Keltouma was taking night classes after work and consequently did not get home until late at night: "My father visited, and I had to stop my classes because I couldn't tell him that I got home at 9:30, 10:00. He wouldn't have understood. He wouldn't have taken it well." As Joseph (1996:201) clarifies, "Family both supports and suppresses women. This paradox of support and suppression, love and power, generosity and competition compels both attachment to and struggle within families."

Although women were likely to express ambivalence about their father's attempts to control them, they were less understanding of their brother's attempts to do likewise. In some families, brothers were as hard or harder on their sisters than fathers were. They too felt responsible for protecting the family's honor and kept tabs on girls out of the parents' sight. One of Amel's brothers has not talked to her since her wedding to a French Muslim. Hayat noted that her brothers both expected their sisters to serve them and clean up after them, and monitored their behavior outside the house, and that when brothers were not watching out for them, male cousins were. According to Mbruka (33-year-old Algerian), her brother was angry growing up because her parents would not let him take on this role:

> My brother didn't have, we had some difficult times, especially during adolescence where a girl doesn't go alone with a friend to the movies, because there are men at the movies. And my brother took it badly with his group of friends, um, boys who said, "Uh oh! We saw your sister at the movies." And he couldn't deal with it at home; it wasn't his business. It wasn't his role. If he wasn't happy about it, that's the way it goes. So the discussion was with my parents, and my brother didn't have any authority over me, unlike the classic way of doing things, it's the father, it's the brother; it's horrible for an Algerian girl or a Maghrebin girl in general.

Mbruka's brother was also the only boy required to participate equally in household tasks. She attributed her freedom as an adolescent and the equal treatment of boys and girls at home to her mother's unwillingness to repeat her own experiences growing up with a very strict father.

Mothers thus made decisions and set standards in some families, but not in all. A few mothers were as strict or stricter than fathers, but many tried to make life somewhat easier for their daughters. Sometimes mothers helped in discreet ways, lending a sympathetic ear or saving money to help pay for a trip to France. Hayat, whose traditional father wanted to end her schooling, was aided by her mother's coaxing of her father and the plane ticket purchased with additional income her mother made sewing. Placing mothers in the role of confidante could cause problems, however, as Malika found when she told her mother that she was living with her French boyfriend, and her mother had to keep the secret from her father. The strain of hiding this from her husband finally led her to have a breakdown. Girls in the Maghreb, particularly the eldest daughters, are often especially close to their mothers, and they may choose to monitor their own behavior so as not to jeopardize their mother's status in the family (Lacoste-Dujardin 2000).

Many participants remembered that their mothers' hands were tied, and that they often suffered under their husbands' familial and sometimes physical control. Isma (36-year-old Algerian) labeled her mother "oppressed," and remembered that after her father's death, her mother threw out all his pictures and the objects he had made for the house. Amel (26-year-old Algerian) related that even after her mother's divorce and election as mayor of a town, she was still controlled by her ex-husband and sons. Despite his own remarriage, Amel's father did not want his ex-wife to marry another man. One of Amel's brothers, who sometimes lived with her father, would threaten every man who got involved with his mother. Because her brother lived at

home until the age of 28, Amel says that her mother sacrificed a lot. Warda (58-year-old Algerian) also remembers the double bind in which her father placed her mother. He would allow her to attend weddings and other social events but tell her to be home by a fixed early hour. This meant she had to excuse herself in the middle of a meal in order to make it home on time. Although he never yelled at her for coming home late from work, if she missed one of his prescribed hours for a social event, there was trouble. Consequently, she found herself declining invitations so as not to appear rude when leaving early. Yet at the same time, Warda's mother not only worked outside the home but also controlled the family's money. Warda attributes the amount of power that her mother did have to the fact that she was of a higher social class than her father.

Participants were also quiet about their behavior, or decided to abide by the rules because they wanted to protect their younger sisters. Hayat in particular made great sacrifices in her life in order to open the door for her younger sisters:

> I have three sisters in Algeria, so I tried, I tried to do the maximum so that they wouldn't be badly seen because of me. I had to set a very good example so that they would have the path open to college. . . . I have to be discreet . . . so that my sisters can go to college, so that they can even come to France, you see? So that the parents don't say, "She left. She got us." You see? So I have to do it for everyone, for my sisters. . . . There's a girl who came here at 17; she's been in France for two years. . . . She took off; she left the house. Four months already and she hasn't contacted anyone. Me, that's something I'd never do. I'd never do that, run away, because it would be a catastrophe. It would really mean condemning my sisters.

Although Hayat herself was not able to attend college, one sister has graduated from college, one is currently enrolled, and the youngest is planning to go.

Malika also revealed that being the oldest sister is difficult: "My sister also came to France, and she also kept her life a bit hidden, except that it didn't make her suffer the way it made me suffer. After all, I was the one who was first. When she was born, I was set as the example." Malika's failed romance with her French boyfriend and her confrontations with her father allowed her sister to marry a French man and have children without problems. Malika realizes that her difficulties alleviated those of her sister. Occasion-

ally, as with Hayat, the responsibility to step out of a traditional role and still be a "good girl" also helped women outside the family. The price was not only sacrifice, but also enormous pressure: "I was one of the first girls [in my village] to go to junior high, to go to high school. So actually I opened the way for the girls who are going to school now. I had to give the best of myself really. I had to work more than everybody else to prove I was capable, that I'm not a loose woman." Hayat was desperately trying to avoid marriage, but for many women, marriage was the way out of a difficult family life. Even Hayat remarked that had she stayed in Algeria, she would have preferred getting married to living with her brothers (her father has since died). "You don't have a choice. It's inevitable. It can be an escape. Sometimes girls say I prefer to get married, even if it's not a very good solution. It's not because you get married that you'll be happy, because you're going to rediscover you brothers, your father, you'll always find them again. They'll get you."

MARRIAGE AS A MEANS OF ESCAPE

Marriage, as Hayat notes, is really the only option for most women in the Maghreb, yet many girls look forward to it. It is the rite of passage into adulthood, and although girls know they are still likely to be constrained by their husbands, they relish becoming adult women, establishing their own homes, and gaining the prestige that comes with bearing children.[4] As Najet (46-year-old Moroccan) noted, "It's a pleasure to be married, to be out of one's parents', to build a home, to make a life." When asked about her immigration to France, Najet downplays it. For her, the turning point in her life was getting married: "Marriage, that's it, get out. There or here, it's the same for me. It's the man that changes things a bit, meaning the marriage, that's it. That is in your head, being married, that's all. At 19 you don't understand much anyway." Fouzia echoed the same sentiments:

F: I was young. I only thought about getting married, later having children, that's all, all that was in my head. I didn't think about coming to France, no, no, no.

CK: It wasn't too hard on your parents to see their daughter go so far away?

F: No. Parents, when a girl is married, she has to follow her husband, that's all.