

Motherhood and Transitional Justice in Morocco

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I evoke the name of my mother who supported me throughout it all, suffering through the hardships of weekly travel from El Hoceima to Oujda to visit me in prison. Through her, I evoke the faces of all the mothers whom I got to know during my detention or during the fight of victims and their families to uncover the truth about the past and the disappeared.

Abdeslam Bouteyeb
IER's public hearings in El Hoceima, 2005

My thanks are due to the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, to the militants, men and women, and their mothers: Um¹ Hani, Ummi Fatema, Ummi Thoraya, Ummi Aicha, Ummi Maryam, Ummi Hafida and the list goes on.

Halima Zine El Abdidine
AMDH's public hearings in Rabat, 2005

From 1956 to 1999, ideologies as varied as communism, Islamism, pan-Arabism, feminism, Amazigh activism, and Sahrawi separatism motivated Moroccans to engage in social, cultural, and political resistance. For most Moroccan women and mothers, however, militantism during the Years of Lead was not a choice but a response to the regime's massive oppression that targeted dissidents, their families, and at times, entire villages and regions. This violent history of modern Morocco has long been obscured and it was not until 2004, with the testimonies of victims and their families at the public audiences of Morocco's official Truth and Reconciliation Commission (known by its French acronym IER, *Instance Equité et Réconciliation*), that the regime openly admitted its systematic use of torture and repression in the past. National and international observers celebrated IER's audiences as a public catharsis that broke the wall of fear and silence in the country. This was especially true for marginalized groups, including women and

¹ *Um* or *Ummi* in Arabic means 'mother' or 'my mother.' All translation from Arabic and French to English are done by the author, unless specified otherwise.

mothers, who came forth with stories of victimization and resistance to establish justice for their kin.

Drawing on victim testimonies in Morocco's official and unofficial Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, I examine these silenced memories of and about mothers in Morocco's truth-telling projects and highlight women's role as caregivers, truth claimants, and justice seekers, as well as political agents militating against state violence. I argue that the regulative setting of Morocco's TRCs, along with the incomplete process of cultural trauma during Morocco's transitional justice projects of 2004-2015, hindered the process of identity construction that could have resulted from these mothers' act of testimony. I believe this explains the continued invisibility and limited political agency Moroccan women have in the country today.

Notwithstanding its shortcomings in questions of gender and accountability, Morocco's IER established a new narrative on the political agency of women and mothers from the region.² When the IER concluded its work in 2006, it highlighted in its reports how, starting in the 1970s, mothers and wives of political detainees brought national and international attention to the repression in the country. Mothers, most of whom were illiterate, unpoliticized, and from marginalized communities, created networks of solidarity, coordinated actions to look for their kin, and organised protests to demand justice for their children. Mothers were also acknowledged for participating in truth caravans and testimonies that jumpstarted and strengthened Morocco's transitional justice projects in 2004 (Kingdom of Morocco, 2009).

This acknowledgment, however, did not translate into a more inclusive history of modern Morocco. The (official) historiography of the Years of Lead ignores women's voices and their place in Moroccan postcolonial history both as victims and history makers (El Guabli, 2019). For anthropologist Susan Slyomovics, who has written extensively on women and human rights in Morocco, the female subject's suffering and role in political struggle will become visible in the country's history only if and when women's memories are clearly and publicly articulated (Slyomovics, 2005). This articulation, albeit regulated, was possible to some extent in avenues such as IER's public hearings and publications by the *Conseil National des Droits de l'Homme*

² The IER was the first transitional justice experience in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Despite its shortcomings, Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission of 2014 used the Moroccan approach to gender and understanding of women as direct and indirect victims of violence to achieve better justice and equity in financial reparations between Tunisian men and women.

(CNDH), Morocco’s state institution for human rights (Kingdom of Morocco, 2008). Other women activists were able to write themselves into the history of modern Morocco in memoirs and testimonial literature (El Guabli, 2019). But these independent representations of the Years of Lead in contemporary Moroccan culture rarely reach the cultural mainstream and thus fail to bring the extremes of the past to the everyday life of Moroccans. Cinema has also attempted to mediate women’s voices to the public and render their role more visible but its reach was timid and confined in time and space of the now defunct transitional justice projects of 2004-2015.³

Indeed, there is no political will to continue this memory work to safeguard and uphold the gains of this experience that the 2011 constitution enshrined as fundamental rights. Regardless, the Moroccan regime has been reluctant to implement the majority of IER’s recommendations.⁴ Former political prisoner, IER commissioner, and CNDH president Driss El Yazami declared in 2015: “The process of transitional justice has finished in Morocco. We need to move to other important human rights issues, including the rights of migrants and women.”⁵ What El Yazami fails to recognize, though, is that in the absence of an imaginary of rights that acknowledges women’s role as political agents, making their rights and struggle visible in the public consciousness and official histories of the country, violence against Moroccan women will not cease and equity will not be achieved. Moroccan women need access to more public space to share their memories, complete the trauma process, foster their democratic participation, and enter the Moroccan imaginary as social and political agents, and not just as victims.

To show this, I use empirical evidence from two sources. The first one is victim testimonies from IER’s public audiences in 2004 and 2005. The second source is the opposition-led truth inquiry “Testimonies Without Chains for the Truth, *Témoignages en Toute Liberté pour la Vérité*”

³ Memorialization initiatives as articulated in IER 2 encouraged the re-enactment of victims’ memories in Moroccan cinema. However, representations of the country’s violent past were marred by ambiguity and minimalistic historical facts that obscured the truths uncovered in IER and victim testimonies. Except for some notable productions in the documentary genre, such as *Rif 58-59: Break the Silence* by Riffian filmmaker Tarik El Idrissi, most Moroccan filmography of the Years of Lead focuses on post-prison life without much investigation of the past. For more, see Belkziz, Najwa (2017). *The Politics of Memory and Transitional Justice in Morocco* and Peralta, Lidia (2021). “Latent and Manifest Filmic Narration: Prison as a Visual Icon and the Representation of Political Repression during the Years of Lead in Moroccan Cinema (2000–2018).” *Rethinking History* 25 (2): 166–185.

⁴ On this, see for example Hadji, Mustapha (2021). “Moving from Mirage to Reality: Transitional Justice and Prevention in Morocco,” *The International Center for Transitional Justice*. Available at https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ_Report_Prevention_Morocco.pdf.

⁵ Interview with the author, in Belkziz, Najwa (2017), *The Politics of Memory and Transitional Justice in Morocco*, p. 233.

organised in the same years by the AMDH, *Association Marocaine des Droits Humains*, which considered the IER inadequate and compromised. In both cases, victim testimonies were recorded in audio-visual and written forms. However, access to these is limited since IER’s website shut down once it concluded its work in 2015. And while the Moroccan Council for Human Rights’ website offers IER’s final reports and edited publications related to the Years of Lead, the bulk of IER’s testimonies and other related documents are no longer available. The AMDH, on the other hand, published an edited version of victim testimonies in a book, but its distribution was limited to human rights activists and AMDH sympathisers. This analysis is thus inspired by the urgent need to document and publicize these testimonies, which will give women’s voices visibility in the Moroccan human rights imaginary.

Politicized Motherhood in the Years of Lead

Numerous scholars have highlighted women's pivotal role in exposing and resisting state violence during the Years of Lead (Saoudi, 2001; Rollinde, 2002; Slyomovics, 2005; Guessous, 2009; Slyomovics, 2012; Vairel, 2014; Belkziz and Pennell, 2017; El Guabli, 2018). In his book *Another Morocco*, prominent intellectual and activist Abdellatif Laâbi credits women and mothers for the advancement of the human rights cause in Morocco (Laâbi, 2013). Indeed, families, led by mothers but also wives, daughters, and sisters, organised into a movement to demand justice and truth from the Moroccan regime that had forcibly disappeared and illegally detained their sons, daughters, husbands, brothers, or fathers.⁶ After each mass repression, such as the 1972 wave against the Marxist-Leninist activists or the 1983-84 one against Islamist militants, women formed a network throughout Morocco that compiled lists of the disappeared and detainees and documented the abuses perpetrated by the state against the victims and their families. In her testimony before the AMDH, Halima Zine El Abidine explained how,

⁶ The core group of the families of the disappeared formed around the kin of the syndicalist and leftist militant Abdelhak Rouissi (disappeared on 4 October 1964), the trade unionist Houcime Manouzi (abducted in Tunisia on 29 October 1972), Belkacem Ouzzane (an officer of the auxiliary forces who disappeared on 30 August 1973) and the family of Jilali Dik (a military officer who disappeared in the secret detention center Tazmamart in August 1973). At the same time, the Algeria-based Association of Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and Disappeared (Asociación de Familiares de Presos y Desaparecidos Sahrawis - AFAPREDESA) documented and compiled lists of the disappeared and detained victims from the Western Sahara since 1975. A third group was set up by the families of detainees such as Abdellatif Laabi’s wife Jocelyne, Amine Abdelhamid’s wife Latifa and Abraham Serfaty’s sister Evelyne, after the mass arrests of the frontists (*23 Mars, Ilal Amam and Servir le Peuple*), UNEM militants and UNFP members between 1973 and 1977. Families of Islamist detainees formed groups in Marrakech, Casablanca and other cities following their mass arrests between 1981 and 1984 and faced the same regime persecution as the mothers of the Marxist militants. For more, see Rollinde (2002), Slyomovics (2005) and Vairel (2014).

I met other mothers and wives of political detainees when my husband was arrested in Marrakesh in 1974. We talked and got to know each other and that's when the movement of political prisoners' families was started. We met the governor of Marrakesh and demanded the release of our children and husbands. He denied having any political prisoners. After many street protests, they released 60 detainees but disappeared the rest of them... On 10 December 1979, it was the mothers who knocked on the doors of media organisations and political parties... Mothers, most of whom were illiterate, stormed UN headquarters and organised sit-ins ... Mothers protested in front of police stations and prisons, standing for 12, 24 and 48 hours.

These mothers met in police offices, hospitals, or prisons while looking for their kin. They came from different regions and represented different political movements. Most of these women were illiterate and unpoliticized. Their struggle against the state stemmed from the mother's gender-normative role and 'natural' right to care for her children and her duty to protect her family. Some of them, however, engaged in political activism as a response to state repression against their kin. In both cases, they used their collective identity as mothers to confront and embarrass the state and force it to reveal the fate and whereabouts of their children. The mothers cried and suffered in private but also in public, pleading with the authorities, visited their kin in prison, and brought them food. In her testimony before the AMDH, the mother of Saida and Aziz El Mnebhi recounted:

They disappeared and tortured my son Aziz El Mnebhi who was the president of the National Union of Moroccan Students (UNEM) in Derb Moulay Cherif for 14 months and five days. I looked for him in police stations, cried, and pleaded with the authorities: 'I just want to know where Aziz is. I just want to see him.' I travelled every week from Marrakesh to visit my son in prison, waiting for hours before I could see him. At times, they would tell me: there are no visits, come back next week and leave the food basket.

In performing their roles as mothers and caregivers, Moroccan women imbued their traditional role as nurturers with political meanings. Their collective identity as mothers of victims or martyrs also pushed them to engage in resistance, coordinating meetings in their homes, providing housing to women visiting their children in remote places, gathering funds to help women and families in economic distress, and speaking to local and international media to expose state repression. Detained in April 1984 in Marrakesh, Abou Bakr Douraidi died after a 58-day hunger strike in prison. His sister Fatema described in her testimony how,

each year, the families of the martyrs would commemorate Mustapha and Abu Bakr on the day of their death despite the makhzen's repression. We would invite other families from around the country as well as the national and foreign press and human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, the FIDH [International Federation for Human Rights], and the AVRE [Association for Victims of Repression in Exile]. These commemoration days would turn into conferences where families gathered to charge the wrongdoers with crimes and organise activities to push for the release of the political prisoners and the forcibly disappeared.

Morocco's militant motherhood is remarkably similar to other resistance movements led by mothers in Latin and South America. The *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina and the *Arpilleristas* in Chile, for instance, were crucial in exposing and undermining the criminal regimes of the military juntas in the 1970s and 80s. By subverting the traditional gender roles imposed by their patriarchal society and publicly defying the oppressive regime, the *Madres* staged one of the most visible and influential resistance movements of the last century. However, the similarity is not that surprising if we account for the influence progressive norms and activists from the region had on political opposition in Morocco during the Years of Lead. The emblematic revolutionary Mehdi Ben Barka, his links to the Third-Worldist movement, and his leadership of the Tricontinental Conference before his disappearance in 1965 are but one example.⁷ Hence, it is plausible to suggest that Moroccan mothers and families of the disappeared were advised by activists and human rights organisations with leftist leanings to model their resistance after the *Madres* movement. This was, at least, the reasoning of the Moroccan authorities who distrusted and persecuted Moroccan mothers because they believed them to be mere puppets in the hands of the leftist opposition.

Moroccan Mothers as Memory Keepers

During his reign, King Hassan adopted a religious discourse to reinforce his image as the father of the nation and the spiritual leader of the country,⁸ stressing that to receive God's blessings, Muslims must obey their father-leader, lest they be admonished. In so doing, King Hassan equated political dissidence with shameful behaviour and religious disobedience. The monarch/father

⁷ For more on the links between resistance movements in Latin America and Morocco, see Stafford, Andy (2009). "Tricontinentalism in recent Moroccan intellectual history: the case of Souffles." *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*. Vol. 7, No. 3.

⁸ For more on this, see for example Hammoudi, Abdellah (1997). *Master and Disciple: The Cultural Foundations of Moroccan Authoritarianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

deployed the concept of filial piety (*Birr al-Walidayn*) to demand absolute obedience from his subjects/children. Thus, when Riffians rebelled in 1984, for example, King Hassan disowned them, calling them *masakhit sidna* (the objects of his and God's wrath). In other cases, the regime forced mothers to disown their children on national TV and call them traitors (Belkziz and Pennell, 2017). By staging public ceremonies commemorating their children as heroes who had been unjustly killed by the regime of the "father" and sacrificed for the sake of the "the fatherland," Moroccan mothers re-established their children's memory as rightful defenders of rights and justice.

Mothers as guardians and repositories of Morocco's collective memory was repeatedly highlighted in IER's and AMDH's public audiences. In his testimony, Hakkim Benchemas describes how his childhood was framed by his mother's memories about '*am iqabbaren*, the bloody events of the Rif war in 1958-9. He remembers:

When I was little, I lived in an atmosphere of fear and terror because of the horrific stories my mother told me about the repressive years of 1958/59 where Riffian villages were randomly bombarded by military planes... Instead of bedtime stories and fairy tales, my mother told me stories of massacres, illegal detentions, repression, and injustices committed by the officers of Ait Boughebar.

This transmission of memory from one generation to another is what Marianne Hirsh terms postmemory, a knowledge transfer that ensures the safeguard of memories of the Years of Lead in the Moroccan social fabric and imaginary (Hirsch, 2012). For Khadija El Malki, her testimony is a chance to reinstate her mother's memory as a member of Morocco's nationalist movement. She recounts how her mother was a militant (*munadila*) who often carried arms hidden in the wool on her back in Oujda. Indeed, many illiterate women struggled to gain recognition for their participation in the nationalist movement, akin to that enjoyed by their male counterparts in Morocco (Slyomovics, 2012, p. 57). Testimonies like this challenge the silence of Moroccan history on women's role in the armed resistance during colonial times.

In addition, Moroccan mothers initiated other memorialization efforts that called national and international attention to the heinous acts of the regime. As seen earlier, funerals and commemorative ceremonies of martyrs such as Abou Bakr Douraidi, Mohammed Grina, Mustapha Belhewari, Abdelhak Chbada or Saida Mnebhi were another opportunity for mothers to signify their political work by reaffirming their identity as "mothers of martyrs" who sacrificed their

progeny for the sake of the struggle. In her testimony, Zahra Lakhder spoke proudly of her son Mohammad Grina, a UNEM militant who died under torture in 1979:

My son asked me on his death bed in the hospital: mother, are you mad at me? I answered: absolutely not, my son! I'm proud of you: if you live, you are a man and if you die, you are a hero [...] I'm proud of my son's funeral. The procession was immense. It went through the city despite police attempts to bar us access to the roads... I received condolence letters from Sudan, Palestine, and all Gulf countries. Thank God.

Islamic doctrine confers the title of 'martyr' upon anyone, male or female, who dies while fighting in the name of God. Thus, in Islamic discourse, any *shaheed* or *shaheeda* instantly gain the highest status (besides prophets and angels) and eternal life. This honour transfers to the families of the martyrs, especially their mothers, who gave birth and sacrificed their children for the country's sake. During the Years of Lead, the concept of *shaheed* came to encompass those who died under torture or while fighting oppression in the form of colonialism or authoritarianism, regardless of their beliefs. These included Muslim militants as well as Marxist-Leninist dissidents who rejected religion. *Shaheed* also comes from the same root word as witness *shaahid* and testimony *shahaada* in Arabic, giving the term a double meaning in this context: a witness of injustice.⁹ In the same way, mothers became witnesses of the injustice that resulted in the martyrdom of their children, which they exposed to the world during the funeral rituals. In her testimony before the IER, Batoul Tarawat introduced herself as "the mother of the martyr Mustapha Belhouari," a UNEM militant who died under torture in 1984. Describing his funeral procession, she explains the honour and pride she felt:

When the corpse of Mustapha arrived in Marrakesh, 4000 people were in my house waiting for him from every part of Morocco. The police surrounded the house... The funeral procession was enormous. They said this was the funeral of a martyr. They all wanted to take part and pray for him at the mosque. Many journalists came as well. The police were everywhere. Whenever we celebrated the anniversary of his death, the police would surveil the neighbourhood and the cemetery and take photos of us.

What these testimonies highlight is how rituals of funeral processions were an opportunity for mothers to encode their resistance in public space and claim their political status as "mothers of martyrs" who bear witness to the regime's violence. The recognition of these mothers' sacrifice

⁹ For an interesting discussion of testimony and women in the Moroccan context, see Slyomovics (2005), pp. 145-50.

and contribution to the national struggle is marked by the number of people who attended the funeral including the leadership of human rights movements and opposition to the regime. Visiting, as anthropologist Julie Peteet explains, has important social significance in Arab culture and "who visits whom is a crucial index of status and social hierarchies."

For a limited time, the IER and AMDH allowed Moroccan women to reaffirm their political agency and reconstruct maternal subjectivity as a witness, memory guardian, and history maker. This was evident in Maria Zaouini's testimony which showed how Moroccan mothers were keenly aware of their right to memory as a mechanism of justice and guarantee of non-repetition. For Zaouini, a former Marxist-Leninist activist, her decision to partake in IER's hearings, despite their controversial and limiting nature, was motivated by her duty to "fill even with little the big gaps of history related to women and state repression so that history acknowledges the role of women beside men in the struggle for freedoms and rights... I testify here because I have hope that these things won't happen again to our sons, daughters, and grandchildren."

Motherhood between Regulated Testimony and Victim Subjectivity

Unlike everyday speech, the public act of testimony aims to transmit a message, a record for posterity. In IER's proceedings, victim testimonies adhered to the state's hegemonic discourse of reconciliation, forgiveness, and breaking with the past. This was achieved thanks to a careful selection of witnesses whose testimonies were coached, edited, and constrained by time and a rule that forbade them to name their perpetrators (Belkziz, 2017). Most women who came forward in IER's public audiences had endured repression without knowing how or why it was happening to them and their families. Mothers and housewives like Aicha Ouherfou and Roqaya Ouhabou were illiterate and came from Amazigh rural underprivileged regions in El Errachidia and Figuig. Their testimonies highlighted their powerlessness as victims and mothers: "They tortured us and beat my children. One of them died because of the ill treatment, and I couldn't afford to take him to the hospital... They ruined my children's future. I ask God to forgive us all, and that's it. I don't want to continue [this testimony]." In contrast, most AMDH witnesses were intellectuals and politicized citizens who had written books or memoirs, such as Maria Charaf and Halima Zine El Abidine. The AMDH featured mothers who were actively involved in denouncing the regime's repression against their children, including martyrs like Saida El Mnebhi. They reiterated their demands for justice and accountability of the perpetrators. Others criticized IER's marginalization of women

and mothers in the indemnification process of victims. They demanded equity in the financial reparation that favoured male victims and ignored women's sufferings and maternal work of caring, providing for their families, and waiting for the release of their husbands.

Truth commissions are designed as democratic spaces for victims of violence, especially marginalized voices like housewives and mothers who don't always have access to such public platforms. Given the time constraints and inability to name their tormentors, Moroccan mothers struggled to speak openly of the violence inflicted on them and to establish themselves as agents of political resistance. Setting the background and naming places, people, and other details help narrativize victims' experiences and provide a visual of the unspeakable to the audience. This is especially problematic when we consider the salience of personal victim testimonies as stand-ins for the collective (Slyomovics, 2012). More importantly, focusing on voices that reinforce the victim status of women without acknowledging their political agency impairs their ability to heal and their confidence in state actors to improve their lives, an important objective of transitional justice projects. As Moroccan anthropologist Nadia Guessous notes, women in Morocco have yet to heal from the traumatic event of the Years of Lead and this begins with "the naming, acknowledging and rendering visible the violence that they lived through and endured and their experience as women" (Guessous, 2009, p. 98).

In closing: while victim testimonies by and about mothers were empowering for Moroccan women, they were not transformative. By bearing witness publicly, they attempted to reconstruct their identity as women, mothers, and political agents after the Moroccan state's use of violence to unmake their subjectivity. However, the regulative nature of the state-sponsored public hearings, the limited audience of the AMDH, and the incomplete transitional justice experience in Morocco hindered this process. Compared to the opposition's audiences that featured unrestricted testimonies by educated and politically active women, fewer accounts revealed Moroccan women's and mothers' political agency in IER's hearings. Instead, the official audiences highlighted memories of raw suffering, hopelessness, and defeat against the all-powerful and criminal regime. IER's testimonies focused on women and mothers as passive subjects whose identities and bodies were destroyed by state violence. They stressed a discourse of shame and loss of honour, womanhood, and motherhood. However, in the absence of memorialization initiatives that investigate the past and elevate women's testimonies, there cannot be a routinization of the traumatic memories of the Years of Lead, thus hindering the integration of women's voices in

Moroccan cultural memory and social imaginary. Scholarly inquiries into women's testimonies about the Years of Lead are more necessary than ever to bring the victimization of women and their role as political subjects accurately into the history books. In the absence of accessible archives and a genuine political will to investigate and document the past, the researcher has an obligation to help bring the voices of these heroic Moroccan mothers to national and international audiences.

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