Depicting and Documenting Violence against Women in the Contemporary Counter-Narratives of Moroccan Film

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Abstract

This article argues that films and documentaries made in the last decade by filmmakers working in Morocco challenge the State’s “hagiography”; its official narrative of exceptionalism written by the monarchy to stand as uncontested truth. Since the dawn of the new millennium and the ascendance of Mohamed VI to the throne, this narrative often exaggerates the improvement in recent years of women’s actual sociocultural, political and economic enfranchisement in Moroccan society. The documentary 475 (2013) by Nadir Bouhmouch challenges the positivism of the government’s affirmation that it has ameliorated the lives of all women in Morocco. Equally important, the feature-length fiction film, Much Loved (2015) by Nabil Ayouch, serves to set the record straight on Violence Against Women (VAW) in a country where patriarchal tradition still takes precedence over women’s overall societal enfranchisement.

Keywords: Violence against women, Moroccan cinema, 20 February Movement, women’s rights, human rights

0. Introduction

Since 1999, Moroccan cinema has provided a space to negotiate and debate some of the country’s most pressing sociocultural and political
topics, particularly those impacting women.\(^1\) Since 1999, when the country emerged from *Les Années de plomb* (the Years of Lead) and witnessed the enthronization of King Mohamed VI, popularly known as “M6”, Morocco has prided itself on being a leader of social and political reform in the Arab world. King Mohamed VI, noted as a visionary, has crafted and implemented reforms and modifications to the judicial and legislative branches of government in order to change the system and better Moroccans’ lives, specifically women’s. The more liberal climate has fostered demonstrations and activism that have brought about meaningful sociopolitical reforms. These include: a reformed Labor Code (2003); the new *Mudawwana* (Family Code) (2004); the establishment of the Instance et Reconciliation (IER) and its report (2005) documenting egregious human rights violations during the Years of Lead; and in 2014, the repeal of Article 475 in Morocco’s Penal Code-- an article that “allowed a rapist to marry his underage victim and escape criminal prosecution” (Gagliardi, 2018, p. 572). One of the most notable reforms was in 2011 to the Moroccan Constitution.

On the one hand, M6’s more transparent political climate has offered the space for public demonstrations and increased freedom of speech unlike during his father’s reign. Yet, on the other, critics have pointed out that this freedom of expression has also been keenly monitored and curtailed by the monarchy and the Makhzen whenever it is perceived as getting out of hand (Evrard, 2014; Gagliardi, 2018; Touati, 2014). Critics claim that reforms to the Moroccan constitution in 2011 were only implemented in order to curb the potential of an Arab Spring occurring in Morocco, rather than due to any moral ideal associated with M6’s master vision for a new society. With respect to women, reforms of all types, while making some strides, have not secured or assured their well-being in society on all social levels. According to women’s non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activists members in the February 20\(^{th}\) Movement, as well as artists, filmmakers, journalists and novelists who have exposed in their works the sociopolitical and cultural victimization of women, these reforms “have not sufficed to tackle violence against minor girls [and women]”

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Additionally, human rights activists, feminists, and cultural producers have criticized the monarchy and government for not safeguarding freedom of speech in public space, most significantly in the arts and media, as promised early on in M6’s tenure.

Recent sociopolitical activist films and documentaries made by cineastes such as Nadir Bouhmouch and Nabil Ayouch provide examples of artistic resistance that explore the more democratically transparent, yet also disappointing era of King Mohamed VI’s “reforms” to the nation’s judicial and legislative systems that often directly affect women. Scholar Amy Evrard points out that, the monarchy’s relationship to women’s rights is fraught on many levels. She underscores that because the monarchy “controls both the state and the religion [it is] inimical to the notion of women’s rights and feminism.” This status quo will not change until women “can be full participants in the political and social spheres of Morocco” (Evrard, 2014, p. 115). Subverting national narratives and championing women’s rights, these cineastes’ films and documentaries inspire intellectual debate about the egregious human rights abuses committed in the past and the present against women. Recent films have consequently contributed to keeping alive debate about, and criticism of, what scholar Sylvia Gagliardi suggests is the Moroccan state’s “hagiographic narratives about its human rights progress” (Gagliardi, 2018, p. 569). “Hagiography” alludes to biography and autograph, both terms referring to texts and, more broadly, the written word. Gagliardi explains that the “[Moroccan] state’s hagiography is a clever exercise of rhetorical self-aggrandizement” that is rooted in “national policies, strategies and laws [which] theoretically [highlight] steps in the right direction to address the issue of Violence Against Women (VAW) and its causes and consequences” (Gagliardi, 2018, p. 576). However, as many critics note, these steps have not significantly improved women’s

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2 “Like "biography" and "autograph," the word “hagiography” has to do with the written word. The combining form "-graphy" comes from Greek graphein, meaning "to write." "Hagio-" comes from a Greek word that means "saintly" or "holy." This origin is seen in "Hagiographa," the Greek designation of the Ketuvim, the third division of the Hebrew Bible. Our English word hagiography, though it can refer to biography of actual saints, is these days more often applied to biography that treats ordinary human subjects as if they were saints.” Cited in https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hagiography
safety and enfranchisement in the institutions and policies founded and implemented in the country. In actuality, Morocco’s orchestrated veneer of exceptionalism, transmitted through public policies shaped by the monarchy, have done little to influence lasting change for women in society (Evrard, 2014, pp. 114-115).

The monarchy’s Master Narrative is one rooted in a multi-ethnic and multilingual cosmopolitanism that touts Moroccan *exceptionalism* as its foundation. This view of the country as promoting a cosmopolitanism unique in the Arab world has helped celebrate Morocco’s socio-ethnic diversity, which in turn is expressed in the arts, literature, and various forms of media. Such expansive expression defines exceptionalism as based on an understanding of contemporary cosmopolitanism that, as Kwame Appiah explains, “tempers a respect for difference with a respect for actual human beings” (2007, p. 113). The cosmopolitan author-social-activist recognizes that “no local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other” (Appiah, 2007, p. xvi). Journalist and professor, Cherkaoui Roudani, echoing Appiah’s ideas on cosmopolitanism, explains that Morocco’s exceptionalism is “a rational strategy for the promotion of pluralism that distinguishes Morocco from other nations” (2011, n.p.).

Remarking on the cultural roots of its multiculturalism that have fueled its diversity through the arts, Roudani adds that the Morocco of today is “a Morocco that knew how to rehabilitate its strengths by digging into its rich authenticity without giving up its creative contemporary power which accompanies its modernity.”

In this article, I would like to expand on Silvia Gagliardi’s thesis focused on unpacking the truth about what she defines as the Moroccan government’s “hagiographic narratives about human rights progress” and the discourse of exceptionalism that is attached to them (Gagliardi, 2018, p. 569). It is evident that these narratives have overshadowed “the needs and views of non-elite Moroccan women” who still disproportionately suffer from domestic violence, socioeconomic disparity, and traditional patriarchal structures that are acute in rural

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4 Roudani, Cherkaoui, n.p.
areas (Gagliardi, 2018, p. 569). Films and documentaries\(^5\) made in the last decade by filmmakers working in Morocco engage with these narratives in order to challenge the country’s exceptionalism rhetoric that overshadows realities and truths about the amelioration of women’s agency and actual socioeconomic progress in Morocco. Nadir Bouhmouch’s documentary 475 (2013) questions the Moroccan government’s record on the progress of women’s rights. Feature-length film *Much Loved* (2015) by Nabil Ayouch serves to set the record straight on violence against women in a country where patriarchy still defines the “status and the improvement” of women’s living conditions (Touati, 2014, p. 122). In general, as critics note, the State’s inflated narratives on the progress of human rights has suppressed many women’s stories about violence and abuse. Using these cinematic works as examples, I consider how Moroccan cinema as a medium provides the possibility of counter-narratives to Morocco’s entrenched Master Narratives of exceptionalism. These dogmatic national narratives promote achieved gender equality as a centering beacon of Moroccan millennial modernity, when in fact they fall very short of helping women realize full enfranchisement in society.

1. **Moroccan Film: Documenting the Resistance of the “Everyday”**

Jacques Rancière notes the similarities between fiction and documentary films in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2006) in which he claims that realist film, even if fictional, can achieve the same aims as the documentary if “it calculates the values of truth” and the “potential” for them to produce meaning for audiences (2006, p. 38). These truths are those couched in scenes of “the resistance of the everyday” (Abdelmouman, 2018, p. 5). Moroccan films, whether fictional or documentary, challenge audiences to realize that “resistance” is also rooted in “traditions and everyday stories that are at variance to those being promoted [officially]” and seek to highlight “practices and cultural meanings that are at variance to the rationale governing the present” (Abdelmouman, 2018, pp. 5-6). Both the fictional film and the documentary frequently explore psychological and physical violence against women in order to engage with other subjects such as sociocultural taboos about sexuality, governmental judicial/legal abuses

of power, and the general cracks in Morocco’s human rights’ record that have revealed themselves in recent years. Countering the nation’s official narratives about the sociopolitical and cultural everyday, these cinematographic works are also useful for bringing to light the institutional and societal violence that, despite millennial judicial and legislative reforms, continues disproportionately to affect Moroccan women; not only physically and psychologically, but also economically, socially and politically. They also demonstrate the extent to which Moroccan women can subvert and transgress the socio-normative of society that habitually labels them as the “paria rebelle”. These alternative female narratives cast women as femme-fatales, prostitutes and militant-activists who question the status quo and “who, in taking ownership of [their] marginality, and being proud of [their] solidarity with [their] peers, overturn…the stigmatism and criticize…religious normativity and the unjust relationships of society” (Löning, 2017, p. 186).6

Many Moroccan films made in the last decade draw on localized and regional collective traumas. Fiction film blends into the documentary as filmmakers deal with “a combination of the shifting moral politics at home, the relentless process of neoliberal globalization, the geopolitics of neo-imperialism, [and] the rise of a civilization discourse in which ‘Islam’ is positioned in opposition to the ‘West’” (Bayat & Herrera, 2010, p. 3).7 Documentaries such as Nadir Bouhmouch’s 475 echo in the background of fiction film scenarios such as Nabil Ayouch’s Much Loved, demonstrating that the docurealist film is a powerful medium through which to study the everyday of women’s collective and individual traumas and their causes rooted in global and local systems of exploitation, patriarchal domination and tradition.

The everyday realities for women, as revealed in Bouhmouch’s 475 and Ayouch’s Much Loved, are also linked to our complicated era of globalization by a “truism” grounded in the idea “that we are functioning in a world fundamentally characterized by objects in motion” (Appadurai, 2000, p. 5). A “world-in-motion” is the definitive quality of how globalization operates, is fueled, and sustained. It is a world that sets in “motion…objects, persons, images and

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6 My translation.
discourses…[that] have different speeds, axes, points of origin and termination, and varied relationships to institutional structures” (Appadurai, 2000, p. 6). Yet, as we all know, this 21st century mobile world, powered by the constant transnational flow of goods and humans, is not equitable for all nations and societies: to say that globalization is about a world of things in motion somewhat understates the point. The various flows we see—of objects, persons, images, and discourses—are not coeval, convergent, isomorphic, or spatially consistent. They are in what I have elsewhere called relations of disjuncture” (Appadurai, 2000, p. 5)\(^8\)

Appadurai’s “relations of disjuncture” occur “between economy, culture, and politics”, causing “the complexity of the …global economy” (2000, p. 3). As we have seen in recent years, the increasing inequality in the new millennium with respect to land, money, and more broadly access to the right to enjoy a “being-in-the-world”,\(^9\) has encumbered local socioeconomic forces and exposed the failures of nation states to ensure the well-being of their citizens. Appadurai mentions that relations of disjuncture are most noticeable within the emerging nation-state’s economy. Even at the micro level of the city, livelihoods are frequently compromised “by floating populations, transnational politics within national borders, and mobile configurations of technology and expertise” (Appadurai, 2000, p. 5). Appadurai further postulates that the “framework” through which we should explore such disjunctures has five dimensions that he terms: “(a) ethnoscapes, (b) mediascapes, (c) technoscapes, (d) financescapes, and (e) ideoscapes” (1996, p. 33). These different “scapes” interact, converge and diverge on global and local levels (Appadurai, 2000, p. 5). The films considered in this article reveal that the overly positive discourse of transformation promoted by the Moroccan state with respect to women’s rights crumbles in the framework of relations of disjuncture. For critics, including Bouhmouch and Ayouch, “the tradition of reforms in Morocco [that] present the particularity of being sufficient… are always

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\(^8\) Emphasis added.
\(^9\) In the philosophical sense as explained in Being and Time by Martin Heidegger.
meant to preserve the order of things rather than change it” (Ferrie & Dupret, 2012, p. 22).


Since the early 2000s, documentary filmmaking in Morocco has become a valuable medium to instruct audiences at home and internationally as the country, like many in the MENA region, faces sociocultural and political challenges at the local and global levels. In a country whose population is primarily young, between 18 and 35, and well versed in using the latest social media platforms, millennial filmmakers are able to access global knowledge more easily than in the past. Therefore, it is not surprising to see a burgeoning number of young documentary filmmakers producing their work in the era of millennial protest. Their films offer an “alternative cultural scene” that allows a “means to give voice to the postcolonial condition of an age group that has come of age under globalization” (Bahmad, 2014, p. 380). This new generation is building on a long tradition of documentary filmmaking by renowned filmmakers, such as Hakim Belabbes, Lahcen Zinoun, Izza Génini, and Farida Benlyazid. In the new millennium, Hicham Lasri (Al Jahiliya, la blessure la plus rapprochée du soleil, 2018), Tarik El Idrissi (Rif: 58-59: Briser le silence, 2014), Nadir Bouhmouch (475, 2013), and more recent, young women on the scene-- Rim Mejdi (Stone and Fire, 2007), Leila Kilani (On the Edge, 2011), Tala Hadid (House in the Fields, 2017), Soraya El Kahlaoui (Marocains sans terres, 2017) and Hind Bensari whose documentary We Could be Heroes (2018), won the Best International Documentary Award at Hot Docs Festival in Canada this year—-are making their mark nationally and internationally. This new generation is changing the way films are made in Morocco from subject matter to production. They are also reshaping cinema production in the country by forming their own companies and streaming their films on alternative media platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. Therefore, they are circumventing the national Centre Cinématographique du

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10 Cited in Touati 2014, p. 128.
11 Bensari also currently is conducting an indiegogo campaign to fund her own documentary, Break the Silence, on Article 475. See: www.indiegogo.com/projects/475-break-the-silence
Maroc’s (CCM) traditional structure. Through new media forms, these young documentarists are using their films to counter official narratives that continue to promote the status quo as a “fact of life inherent to patriarchal society and the habitus” (Gagliardi, p. 580).

Twenty-eight-year-old Nadir Bouhmouch is a documentary filmmaker and a human rights activist committed to working at home and abroad to heighten awareness of human rights abuses in Morocco. He is co-founder of “the Guerrilla Cinema movement and currently leads a civil disobedience campaign against the Centre Cinématographique Marocain, the government body which regulates and censors films in Morocco - in Nadir’s opinion a violation of the right to freedom of expression” (Weibel, 2014, p. 140). Bouhmouch’s works in the 2000s capture the power of youth movements, and the broader activism in rural areas of Morocco. One such example is the film, Timadine N’Rif (2017), which documents the 2016 and 2017 demonstrations for justice in the Rif region. In general, Bouhmouch’s films transmit the everyday challenges and realities of society at all levels: civil, political, and social. His recent films have emerged from the 20th of February Movement that in 2011 galvanized Morocco’s youth to stand up and demand a host of reforms, notably focusing on: police brutality, electoral fraud and corruption, censorship, and unemployment (high even among young people with advanced university degrees). Bouhmouch’s 2011 film, My Makhzen and Me, as well as his later film 475 (2013) and the most recent Timadine N’Rif’ (2017), are all openly available to the public on his website (nadirboumouch.com), complete with subtitles in English and Spanish. The films are raw assessments of the socio-political and economic work that remains to be done to ameliorate average Moroccans’ lives. Award winning 475, a film emerging from the millennial youth movement climate in Morocco, forefronts women’s rights as one of the necessary, principle components for positive social change in the country. The film also reflects the power of social media and alternative platforms for filmmaking that have allowed Bouhmouch and other filmmakers to circumvent government censure.

12 “The film won Reporters without Borders’ and the Deutsche Welle The Bobs (Best of the Blogs) awards for Best Social Activism and was nominated for the BBC Arabic Film and Documentary Festival” (Weibel 2014, p. 140).

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As in all his documentaries, Bouhmouch begins 475 with the advisory claim: “This is a non-commercial film… it was made illegally as a form of civil disobedience to call for freedom of expression in the arts in Morocco and as a stand against state regulation of filmmaking through the Centre Cinématographique Marocain.” In my opinion, the goals of the film are threefold. First, to set the record straight, presenting all the facts of Amina’s death. Second, to outline how patriarchy continues to influence politics, judicial reform, and general views about women’s enfranchisement in society. And, third, to demonstrate that the sociocultural dimensions of rural life in Morocco are radically different than those of more urban settings, offering women few means to improve their living conditions, seek recourse for abuse, and help (either through NGOs or official government institutions) to leave their violent domestic situations. The essence of the film is encapsulated in feminist-activist and rape survivor Houda Lamqaddam’s statement that: "For female rape victims, it's still very difficult to find justice…the judicial system is heavily biased in favor of men, the attackers, and there is very little support for women who are victims of rape and sexual violence.”¹³

475 focuses on the tragic story of the 2012 case of Amina al-Filali, a 16-year-old-girl who was raped and then forced to marry her rapist in order to preserve her family’s honor, resulting in her suicide by taking rat poison. Bouhmouch’s film also reveals larger issues of socioeconomic and political disparity between urban and rural women that continue to surface in Morocco. The film explains the controversial subject of “Article 475” of Morocco’s Penal Code that disproportionately affected women living in rural areas. In 2014, the Article was finally repealed after demonstrations across the country forced parliament into action.

475 is a prime example of the importance of documentary filmmaking to documenting violence against women as it also challenges the more general, positive, pervasive and persuasive official Moroccan narratives on human rights. The film considers the fact that while “legal remedies” have been politically implemented, they are deficient in “tackling the reasons why women are subject to VAW [violence against women] and

unable to extract themselves from it” (Gagliardi, 2018, p. 585). Appadurai’s various “disjunctures” occurring in, and expanding from, the many scapes present in contemporary Morocco are part of the gender inequality equation. In the neoliberal era as Appadurai and other social critics suggest, current socioeconomic realities have driven acute wedges between those who have access to sociopolitical and financial power and those who do not.

As mentioned above, the controversial Article 475 was overturned in 2014, after demonstrations and protests by Moroccan citizens took place across the country. However, Bouhmouch’s film remains relevant for what it exposes about the persistent official whitewashed narratives concerning women’s rights and their sexuality and socioeconomic status in society. For example, the film clearly counters the governmental and international perceptions that reforms to the Moroccan Family Code (Mudawwana 2004) have ameliorated all women’s status in society. Bouhmouch and many critics point out that these reforms have fallen short when scrutinized according to class and geography (rural vs. urban).

Additionally, Bouhmouch as an international filmmaker-activist seeks to show international audiences that the Filali tragedy “was not that simple.” He affirms that “475 [was] not the [only] source of the tragedy” (Bouhmouch 475). Amina’s death was rooted in many other sociocultural and political factors such as lack of access to education, to sufficient economic means, and pervasive and persistent class inequalities (Bouhmouch 475). Bouhmouch also takes issue with the coverage of the Filali story by the western press, which is faulted for emphasizing stereotypes “with a broad brush.” The interworking of Appadurai’s globalized mediascape disjuncture is evident in the documentary. Feminist-activist Houda Lamqaddam, who narrates the story throughout the film, suggests that this was the “perfect story for western ears and eyes...” The story allowed the media to “beat once again on the drums of orientalism and its stereotypes of Muslim peoples...what the western media missed was the growing debate around women’s rights and sexual violence [in Morocco].” Filali’s story, thus, could not just be studied from the angle of Article 475, a holdover from the colonial French penal code. Rather, the law had to be considered as the legacy of colonial history and the subsequent systemic disparities between the rights of women in rural areas and those of the
upper classes, living primarily in urban settings. Women in rural areas, because of illiteracy and lack of financial resources, coupled with the paradigms of traditional patriarchy, continue to be vulnerable to unchanging traditions and practices.

Religion also contributes to the confusion surrounding women’s rights, as Bouhmouch wants his audiences to recognize. Does Islam “really support sexual violence?” is a defining question in the film. As Johanna Buisson, a professor of theology and women’s studies, interviewed by Bouhmouch, notes there is “no justification in the Quran for marrying a rapist and women have the right to refuse husbands.” What role, then, does religion play in determining how rural women see their agency (?) is a question left open-ended in the film. Filali’s father underscores that after Amina’s death, the village imam told him that “she had committed no sin and that she would go to heaven” (475).

To ferret out the nuances and complexity of the Filali story, Bouhmouch and his team—Houda Lamqaddam, Younes Belghazi, and Hamza Mahfoudi—travel to the Filali family’s village near Lahrache. Lamqaddam narrates both the English and Arabic versions of the documentary, thus attesting to Bouhmouch’s mission to reach wider audiences outside Morocco. Once there, it becomes evident that the story is more complicated than what was portrayed in the media, locally and internationally. Bouhmouch films as Houda Lamqaddam and Younes Belghazi interview all the people involved. Lamqaddam interviews women in the family—Amina’s mother, siblings and her father’s second wife. Belghazi interviews Amina’s father, Lahcen Filali, and the men implicated in the narrative: Mustapha “the rapist” and his father. These live interviews with the family are interspersed with interviews with activists, politicians (conservative and progressive), sociologists, human rights lawyers, and human rights’ activists such as Khadija Riyadi, head of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (l’Association marocaine des droits humains (AMDH)), and Fatima El Maghnaoui, head of UAF (L’Union de l’Action Féminine). What ensues is a murky story of “he said, she said”, indicating as Leila Slimani notes in her work, Sexe et mensonges: La vie sexuelle au Maroc (2017), that discussions of sexuality, particularly when it pertains to women, is habitually a fraught topic: “many men and women prefer to turn away [their] eyes” (détourner les yeux) (Slimani, 2017, p. 13).
Bouhmouch and his filming team soon discover that documenting the facts leading up to Amina’s suicide are virtually impossible to establish. Her father, a bigamist, states “he tried to protect his child” and that after her death, he “sought judicial aid and to take Mustapha (the rapist) to court.” However, we learn that authorities affirm that Lahcen Filali filed the “marriage contract” and from Filali’s second wife, Chou’a, that it was Amina’s biological mother, Zohra, who “arranged for Amina to be married after the incident.” It was Zohra who later decided to “press charges” against Mustapha, accusing him also of “kidnapping” which “has a heavier sentence than rape”, a fact ironically pointed out by Lamqaddam. Mustapha, the accused, denies wrongdoing and asserts that Amina was “his wife” and that sexual relations were consensual. Chou’a, Lahcen Filali’s second wife, also divulges to Lamqaddam that she was the victim of rape by Lahcen Filali, and that she “fears for her safety and that of her children every day.” This knowledge taints the image of the protective father seeking justice for his daughter.

It is also evident in the film that lack of knowledge about the laws protecting women and basic illiteracy contributed to the family’s turmoil, ultimately derailing the justice they sought for their daughter. Lahcen Filali affirms, “no one from Rabat [no official] came to investigate the crime.” The division between rural and urban justice is underscored as we learn that the case was closed and no further action taken by local officials. Mustapha was not detained. As the camera takes us through a tunnel near the Filalis’ village, Lamqaddam remarks: “according to her father, this is the tunnel that Mustapha used to take Amina to the forest where he would rape her. What actually happened at the end of this tunnel is only a truth that Mustapha and Amina know.” Amina’s story is buried as other stories from the village pertaining to violence against women are revealed, particularly that of Chou’a, Filali’s second wife. She too was “abducted” she claims, kept in a second house away from the first wife, and repeatedly raped by Filali. She divulges her story slowly to Lamqaddam after the interviewer reveals to Chou’a that she, too, was raped. Lamqaddam tells Chou’a that “you do not have to be a victim.” Chou’a protests, though, claiming that she cannot leave because “she has nowhere to go.” This secondary narrative reveals a key component in the sustainability of violence against women:
While most present in the domestic sphere, VAW is a pervasive and, yet often, matter-of-factly accepted human rights violation across society…women, especially from underprivileged and rural backgrounds, have resigned themselves to the status quo…their lack of access to legal remedies…[and] also the fear of losing their children and their means of survival in the absence of their husbands’ socioeconomic support [make them doubly victimized]. (Gagliardi, 2018, p. 585)

Although the Mudawwana reforms of 2004 clearly stipulate that women now have recourse in court and have protection under the law for parental rights in case of divorce (and by extension abuse), they often do not have the means or knowledge to pursue these rights. Particularly if they are from rural areas and ignorant of the specificities of the reforms.  

In Bouhmouch’s documentary, the larger story of continuing VAW in Morocco, despite the official government narrative that touts the contrary, in many ways supersedes Amina Filali’s tragic story. This fact is highlighted halfway through the film when Lamqaddam opens up the discussion pertaining to laws and judicial hearings on women’s rights, sexuality, and how the Filali case is an example of flagrant abuses of gendered power. She narrates as a photo of King M6, surrounded by male politicians many of whom currently serve in Parliament, is shown to viewers: “it seems like the last call is always being made by a man…for Amina, it was either her father, or one of these government officials.” It is here that the film draws a clear link between politics and antiquated, patriarchal cultural mores that still affect and influence the actions of (male) politicians. Changing scenes from the rural to the urban seat of power in Rabat to discuss legislation and Parliament’s lackluster action on women’s rights, Lamqaddam tells us that “a year after Amina’s suicide, a proposition was put forth in Parliament to abolish article 475.” It was met with resistance, certainly by men such as MP Hassan Arif, who was “acquitted of rape the same week as the proposition.” Arif’s victim, Malika Salmini, “was the one who went to jail for contempt of court against a magistrate.” The film also scrutinizes the politics of Abdelilah Benkirane, Prime Minister of Morocco from November 2011-March 2017. Benkirane, member of

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14 See Article 6 of the Preamble of the Mudawwana.
the PJD Islamic Party, is scrutinized for insisting that rape does not happen in marriage and that Amina was “married” at the time of her death. His views are supported by Bassima Hakkaoui, also member of the PJD and Minister of Families and Social Development, who disputes the claim made by an interviewer that “the Moroccan woman faces discrimination and mistreatment.” She defends her position, saying, “this is not true.” Lamqaddam counters by stating, “60% of Moroccan women are victims of gender violence.” However, as 475 specifies, the percentage is continually refuted by the “Islamists who say it is only 35%.” What is evident, as Lamqaddam points out, is that “numbers are not exact because families don’t want to talk about violence and rape.”

Despite the statistics on VAW, ministers in Parliament continue to affirm that cases of rape are rare (at one moment Benkirane states in the film that there were “only 500 during the entire year 2011-2012”) and that women have equal protection under the law. Minister of Justice (at the time of the film) Mustapha Ramid affirms, in a television interview inserted in the film, that “marriage of minors is not banned by the Sharia’a nor by French, Spanish or Belgian laws.” He continues in another scene to demand, “Why are you [women] protesting?...The case of Amina Filali did not involve rape, it involved consensual relations between two youths.” Ramid’s and Benkirane’s as well as many other politicians’ views aired in the documentary lead AMDH Head, Khadija Riyadi, to remark that “when it comes to women’s rights, we are one of the most backwards countries.” Riyadi cites a WTO report ranking Morocco 129th out of 135 countries for its record on “equality between genders.” Interviews with Khadija Riyadi and other human rights activists working in Morocco support the fact that:

> Although the equality of men and women was anchored in Morocco's constitution in 2011, it hasn't arrived in people's daily lives. Women are supposed to be pure and virgins until marriage or they are cast out. It is engrained in the more traditional sectors of Moroccan society as well as other countries, including
several in the Arab World: rape is a stigma; no other man will marry a rape victim. (Griebeler)\textsuperscript{15}

For Lamqaddam, Amina Filali and many other victims, this means the struggle is not yet over. In the concluding scenes, Bouhmouch’s documentary does not shed much light on the details of Amina Filali’s rape and subsequent suicide. It is clear, though, that she was a victim of an accumulation of traditional views, patriarchal maneuvering, and lack of resources due to her family’s rural poverty. The case remains mired in confusion. Yet the larger messages the film unmarks, and its portrayal of the complexity of Morocco’s gendered political polemics, are telling. Most assuredly, the film discloses, as Lamqaddam affirms in the closing scene, that “the oppression of women does not end in the confines of the household, it goes beyond and penetrates every aspect of the society, from family, to community to state. It ranges from everyday sexual harassment to discrimination against single mothers, and ultimately, to the impossibility of a Moroccan queen.”


While Bouhmouch’s documentary engages with women’s reality in rural landscapes, Nabil Ayouch’s 2015 film, \textit{Much Loved}, offered audiences a shockingly raw and realistic scenario about four prostitutes in urban Marrakech. Although it won critical acclaim in international festivals as well as at the Cannes’ Film Festival in France, the film was immediately banned from theaters “sight unseen by the Moroccan censorship committee” for what was deemed by communications minister Mustapha El Khalfi (also a member of the PDJ) to be “a film [that] undermines the moral values and dignity of Moroccan women as well as the image of Morocco” (Alami, 2016 n.p.). Even though Moroccans could only access several clips from the film on the internet, the actresses as well as Ayouch all received death threats from numerous individuals in Morocco immediately following its release at Cannes. Shortly after its European debut, three men in a Casablanca street savagely beat leading star, Loubna Abidar. Ultimately, she flew to France for safety, where she remains. In an interview, she divulges

that she has filed for French citizenship (although since the incident she has returned periodically to Morocco) (Alami, 2016).

To date, very few academic articles have been published on *Much Loved*. Scholar Madeleine Löning offers an expansive critique of the film’s “subversive identities” and how these trump usual codified norms with respect to gender and sexuality. She notes that what is most remarkable about the film is that it not only looks at the stigmatizing “regard” (look/gaze) Moroccan society focuses on prostitutes, it also takes to task other forms of social marginalization such as “homosexuality, poverty and unwed motherhood” (Löning, 2017, p. 184). The film also criticizes the sexploitation of children, concentrating on them as the most vulnerable victims of Morocco’s thriving sex tourist trade which many have remarked has increased since the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia that shifted the numbers of Europeans seeking sex to Morocco. The film therefore builds on awareness cultivated during the first campaign ever in Morocco against child sexual abuse entitled “Touche pas à mon gosse” (Don’t touch my child), which began in 2003. Engaging with a once very taboo subject, authorities launched the campaign to combat the sexual abuse of children domestically, while also clamping down on the sex tourism trade popular with Europeans and, more broadly, western tourists.16

*Much Loved*’s nuanced look at prostitution, which also entails the marginalization, stigma, and a host of sexual taboos associated with the profession, again tarnishes the official narratives of the State, which deny its prevalence. An additional aspect of the film includes Ayouch’s larger mission to focus on what he affirms is the “rampant hypocrisy in this society—a hypocrisy verging on schizophrenia” (Béar, 2016, p. np.). This hypocrisy covers up the reality of the unfavorable living conditions of many Moroccans, particularly women. In keeping with his dedication to exposing and unpacking sensitive subjects in Moroccan society, *Much Loved* does not depart from the sociocultural and political messages of his previous films: *Ali Zaoua, prince de la rue* (2000), *Une minute de soleil en moins* (2003), *Les Chevaux de Dieux* (2012), and the recent, *Razzia* (2017). All Ayouch’s films are

docurealist as they delve into topics imbedded in the sociopolitical and economic disjunctures of contemporary Morocco. In *Much Loved*, it is the four women prostitutes, abused children, and the transvestites, living off what they make on the Marrakech streets, who are trafficked as *les biens du patrimoine* (material goods of the nation); commodities that have attractive prices for foreign buyers. *Much Loved*, thus, is not just a film about poverty and exploitation of local populations, racism, and gender inequality in Morocco, although these elements do all contribute to its overarching narrative. It is also a film about the divisions caused by micro and macroeconomics. These divisions are not only apparent between North (Europe) and South (Africa), they also reveal internal politics and inequality in the Arab world (for example, rich conservative-UAE against the more socio-culturally open, yet poorer, Maghreb). It is a film that unmask how “globalization has destabilized the spatiotemporal contours of the Moroccan subject, particularly in metropolitan centers” (Bahmad, 2014, p. 380).

In the opening scenes of the film, Noha, Soukaina, and Randa, three of the four prostitute-protagonists prepare for a huge party hosted by Saudi big rollers in an upscale neighborhood in Marrakech. The film’s denouement implicates the spectator’s voyeuristic journey from one party to the next hosted in rich villas and *les clubs de luxe*; the highflying luxury nightclubs for which Marrakech is known. The women are thus determined by a doubled “masculine gaze; that of the characters and of the viewers. Both project their fantasies on them” (Löning, 2017, p. 191). The degradation of the women, who are forced down on hands and knees to act like dogs in heat, lap dance, and hint at fellatio with the men, are shocking as we peer at performers and receivers of sexual encounters through our voyeuristic cinematic window. Noha, as the oldest, acts as the Madame for the group, taking calls from clients and negotiating prices. She is strong and resilient, and wants only the best for her sisters in kind (they all live together in one apartment). She fights constantly throughout the film to keep all the women out of harm’s way. Hlima, a young girl “from a village”, found living on the streets, pregnant, with nowhere to go, is taken in halfway through the film to become part of the “family.” Noha constantly walks a fine line between succumbing to despair and trying to lead a “normal” life as a role model to her younger coworkers. She is also the sole breadwinner for her impoverished and fatherless actual family and a
mother to her illegitimate son who she has hidden away at her mother’s house in a poor area of Marrakech. She is concerned for her little sister who wants to leave school to follow Noha’s same path and a younger brother who is constantly tempted by “drugs and dealing.” Although her mother is ashamed of her career choice, telling her that “I don’t want to see you anymore”, she has no other option but to take the prostitute’s money in order to survive.

Despite their economic and social freedom as women making their own decisions about their finances and the clients they take, Ayouch does not soften the fact that the four prostitutes have all been, previously (or are during the film), subjected to violence at the hands of men. Noha wears visible scars on her forehead from past beatings. She is raped by one of the inspectors at the police station after being picked up for having “disturbed the peace” by hurling bottles at the front gates of the abusive Saudi, Ahmed, who has beaten her co-worker, Soukaina. Noha has been obligated to pay bribes to the police so that the women will be “protected” from street violence and various events associated with their trade. Hlima, the young uneducated “country girl”, who joins the other three prostitutes in the city, was raped in her village and had to flee from it “because of the shame” when she became pregnant. Soukaina is savagely beaten by Ahmed because she discovers that he is homosexual and is only using her “for appearances.” When she protests, defending her womanhood and her profession, stating “j’ai de la dignité” (I have dignity), he strikes her, yelling, “you are a whore, worth nothing, not even a dime.” Even though he is gay, Ahmed has power due to his gender, his nationality, and his money. The film, thus, reminds audiences that these women are still prisoners in the patriarchal, macho society in which they must operate. Their corporeal reality is “reduced to buttocks and breasts” (Löning, 2017, p.192).

While sexual debauchery and explicit, “vulgar” language were the reasons given by the authorities for the ban of Much Loved, I would also like to argue that there were other equally important issues involved in bringing about the film’s censure. These have to do with local and global systems of sex, money, power and abuse of women that certainly the State would prefer not to acknowledge. Particularly

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17 The dialogue is in French and Moroccan Arabic. Interestingly, the most sexually explicit scenes take place in French.
financial issues linked to the financescapes currently visible in the economics of globalization, and how global systems affect local populations, build the foundation of Ayouch’s messages.

Marrakech, like other tourist-destination cities in Morocco (Tangier and Agadir for example), is ground zero for clashes between the global and the local, or what Roland Robertson has coined the “glocal,” revealing “the extent to which what is called local is in large degree constructed on a trans-or super-local basis” (Heise, 2011, p. 159). It is an exemplary city for discussing the interior and exterior interworking’s of globalization and Appadurai’s “disjunctures” revealed in the liberalized economy of Morocco. Geographically set between deserts and mountains, where multiple languages, ethnicities, and histories have interacted for centuries, it is the perfect setting in which to study the intricate tensions between globalization and the local landscapes (financial, ethnographic, geographic, etc.) that make up the systems of people, goods and services of its environment of consumption. Viewers are privy to following the four prostitutes as they participate in, and also are, products of Appadurai’s “world-in-motion.” The glocal financescapes that they must navigate in their daily lives drive the choices the four women must make to “earn their bread.”

On a meta-economic level, Ayouch points a finger at the failure of the Moroccan government and monarchy to assure viable employment for their people, despite the amelioration of the Moroccan GDP in recent years. He demonstrates how global, capitalist foreign consumers (Europeans and Saudis) contribute to local violence associated with prostitution on Marrakech streets; a trade which is part of les petites économies (the shadow economies) operating in Morocco. Lack of political will to devise ways to shore up local economies that are legitimate and cultivate viable employment to assure the well-being of the local population is a predominate theme in the film. Not only are foreign tourists to blame for the prostitutes’ exploitation, Much Loved

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19 “The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Morocco expanded 2.40 percent in the second quarter of 2018 over the previous quarter. GDP Growth Rate in Morocco averaged 4.08 percent from 1999 until 2018, reaching an all-time high of 9.30 percent in the second quarter of 2006 and a record low of 0.50 percent in the fourth quarter of 1999.” https://tradingeconomics.com/morocco/gdp-growth (Last accessed 11/11/18)
reveals opinions stated by international economists who have underscored for years that entities such as the IMF and the World Bank have contributed to the fraying of local economies through mandated structural adjustments, which have forced people to work in shadow industries such as prostitution. Morocco (like many other African countries) has discovered that “participation in IMF structural adjustment programs can lead to great shadow sector activity as IMF-imposed structural conditions … cause significant near-term economic hardship and degrade states’ regulatory capacity” (Blanton, Early & Peksen, 2018, p. 309). Due to the macroeconomics that generate economic stress on Morocco, like other emerging markets, black market or “shadow economies” are virtually undocumented or regulated and are, in fact, thriving. Equally important in terms of economics, the film alludes to how these shadow economies contribute to the Moroccan economy while allowing the government to avoid doing the necessary work to ensure equitable pay and safe working conditions for its people (Evrard, 2014, p. 27).

Scholar Isandra El Amrani underscores the danger of severe socioeconomic inequality in Moroccan society, stating that Morocco’s liberalized economy allows the monarchy to assure its “newest source of popular legitimacy…[which has] become a safety valve for pent-up pressures.” A more socioeconomic and political liberalized economy, though, does not discount the fact that “beneath the surface of the new democratic era…old political formulas for maintaining power continue to prevail” (El Amrani, 2009, p. 320). The shadow economy of prostitution threatens the integrity of official narratives about fiscal responsibility cast in western molds, or “development discourses of capitalist-driven progress” (Medley & Carroll, 2011, p. 285).

One of the ironic results of glocal disjunctures, and a salient facet of the economic messages revealed in Ayouch’s film, is that Morocco’s shadow economy has afforded women moneymaking opportunities that give them more freedom and power over their own choices and ways to extrapolate themselves from oppressive sociocultural milieus. In general, Much Loved demonstrates that the “gendered processes in the neoliberal era… impact women differently depending on their location in the matrix of local power structures as well as geopolitical spaces.” Women are not just “passive victims,” but are “actively engaged in the restructuring of these gendered processes” (Desai & Rinaldo, 2016, p.
On certain levels, the money they earn gives Nora and her co-workers the power to subvert the patriarchal structures of Moroccan society that often keep uneducated and poorer women from power over their own bodies. While the women are often abused at the hands of men, they also, at times, are able to say “no”, or make choices that have better outcomes for them because they benefit from agency derived from financial means. Although living in a marginal space, all the women exercise different forms of agency that they normally would not have had if they had remained in their poorer, traditional class and rural regions from where they come. The marginal space of their trade affords them some freedom and access to alternative ways of being women in Moroccan society. For example, Randa is more easily able to explore her lesbianism and to act on her impulses to find same-sex relationships. Hlima, is able to openly declare her unwed motherhood. Soukaina, enjoying her financial means, decides when (and if) to give money to Katib, her homeless boyfriend. Noha, possessing her own home and “business”, decides when she and her co-workers will work and under what conditions. The space of the marginalized prostitutes is also where othered outcasts—the transvestite Cherine (Oussama) and street children—find their place to speak, tell their stories, and reveal their secrets. This space, however, is not without its violence. Ayouch is careful to make sure his audiences know that at no time do the marginalized live without risk or fear of psychological and/or bodily harm.

Saudi Arabia is at the heart of economic relations of disjuncture portrayed in Much Loved. Ayouch underscores that it is one of the most forceful foreign powers in Morocco. Since 2011, and the various Arab Springs across the Arab world, the Saudis have operated politically and economically to spread their interests. The filmmaker focuses on the Saudis as the essential element of socioeconomic exploitation of the Marrakesh prostitutes, showing the men’s ability to wheel and deal

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politically and economically. They pay off local authorities to turn a blind eye, and local cops to help navigate the planning of their lavish sex parties. In one of the most overtly political moments in the film, when Noha and her coworkers are with the Saudi men for one of their opulent parties, the Arab world and the Saudis’ role in manipulating it are discussed. Rich and poor nations, men and women, and power and weakness are all played against one another as the discussion unfolds. The conversation turns to the plight of Palestinians. After one Saudi suggests that “Palestinians just want to beg, they want money, that’s all”, Soukaina speaks up, stating that “It’s not nice to mock Palestinians; they were chased from their homes after all. We should help them, not criticize them.” She is rebuffed by another Saudi who angrily shouts, “Why are women discussing politics with us men?” Affirming his male prowess, he states, “the Saudis are the masters of the world, we have oil.” To alleviate the tension, Noha changes the subject, quipping, “We have oil too…we Moroccan women, we are the oil, we are even more perfumed and colorful.” Ayouch’s message in this scene is not subtle. Morocco has had to pay a considerable price for Saudi economic development by giving up its citizens to sexual exploitation.

In general, although the women confront on a nightly basis the violence associated with working in the liberalized economy of prostitution, they nevertheless are able to make conscious decisions to free themselves from it. Regardless of what seems to be the prison of their trade, forcing them to kowtow to male domination and the general violence of the streets, they do sometimes “transgress strict social and religions codes as well as the barrier between private and public space” (Löning, 2017, p. 186). Certain spaces are equated with unfettered freedom. The most obvious is Saïd the chauffeur’s car, which offers the women a means to circulate openly in the streets of Marrakech. The prostitutes’ trade, which involves earning money off the grid at hours out of sync with the rhythm of the city in daylight, does allow them to move somewhat freely in public space. They are equal observers and commentators on the urban space that surrounds them, at least from Said’s protective car. He is the only redeeming male figure in the film, an equal, acting as protector, friend, confident and stalwart bodyguard for the women. From the car, the audience and the women observe the outside spaces of everyday Marrakech. Viewers and protagonists gaze out into the
bustling streets where street venders, shopkeepers, as well as beggars and the unemployed, make up a local “world-in-motion.” In the car, the women are both on the edges and in the midst of this world. As part of the whole of the everyday, they assert their presence despite the fact that their trade is unrecognized and taboo. Their freedom of motion allows them to “refuse the image of victim” (Löning, 2017, p. 188). The women’s economically tangible freedom also allows them to dream about other possible worlds. Noha tells the other women that freedom is “to be able to take a plane to an island very far from here … an island where we are respectable; where we will be beautiful without makeup or sexy clothes; and where we will be respected and treated like ladies by men…where we will be princesses.”

Like all who benefit financially from the shadow economy, the women are bound by codes of silence, and secrecy associated with their trade. Thus, one of Ayouch’s goals is to “give them a voice, a voice to these women who live in a society where they are practically invisible and inaudible” (Gilson, 2015, n.p.). Ironically, though, as the filmmaker wants his audiences to admit, prostitution is no secret, but rather an openly known fact making up part of Morocco’s millennial financescape:22 “I wanted to show these women as they are, from their point of view…certainly their lives are hard, made from hurt, solitude, but also from solidarity, friendship and legerity. This idea…[hopefully] balances certain things that are more difficult in the film.”23

In the closing scene, the four women decide to take a “vacation” from their work to enjoy the beach in an upscale hotel in Agadir. Hlima has lost her baby due to a miscarriage, but defying social norms Noha tells her, “don’t be sad, it’s better not to have children.” As they drink vodka on the beach, as the sun goes down, they are unfettered by family, tradition, or masculine power over their bodies. Saïd, sitting on the sand next to them, drinks to them, stating “Aux filles de mon pays” (To the girls of my country). Mocking the Saudis, Randa tells him, “a guy with four girls around him and a cig in his mouth…one would say a true Saudi.” Yet, Saïd is not like these other exploitive men. On the beach, he shares the women’s liquor and their laughter. All are Moroccans.

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Ayouch’s world, Moroccan men and women, no matter their backgrounds, or how they must function within the glocal demands of our age, can sit on a beach and be equals.

*Much Loved* does not attempt to diminish the violence of prostitution. Rather the film exposes the local and global socioeconomic and political forces and failures that have contributed to the persistence of this shadow trade in Morocco. Bouhmouch’s 475 and Ayouch’s *Much Loved* reveal the economic realities that persist in rural and urban environments, and their films provide a space for “the voices of women who have been on the periphery of sites of power” (Gagliardi, 2017, p. 585). These women are relegated to the margins by patriarchal structures that allow physical and psychological violence to continue to harm them.

4. Conclusion

The real and the “fictional” cinematographic works of Nadir Bouhmouch and Nabil Ayouch reveal the extent to which film is an effective medium through which to expose the challenges Morocco faces as it navigates the global socioeconomic and political networks of our millennial “world-in-motion.” For these filmmakers and many others, social and political progress at home will not be possible without the equal participation of women at every level of Moroccan society.

References


