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Sexual Debut in Rabat: New “Arrangements” between the Sexes

Introduction: context of sexual practices in Morocco

Sexual debut is an essential aspect of the socialization process (Balandier, 1984; Courtois, 1998). It is a major component of social control, and the manner in which it occurs provides information about how each society constructs the social and gendered identities of its members, and reveals the different rules of behaviour imposed upon girls and boys (Bozon, 2008).

Recent representative surveys indicate that in most societies, first sexual intercourse is occurring at an earlier age today, and is more dissociated from union formation (a more recent development for girls) than in previous cohorts (Bozon, 2002; Wellings et al., 2006). In some parts of the world, however, it is still hard to assess the extent of the phenomenon. In Arab countries in particular, it is regarded as unacceptable or even “immoral” even to ask men and women at what age they first had intercourse. Consequently, in the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and other studies conducted in these countries, only married women are asked about their sexual lives (Bozon, 2003), and there are no official figures for non-marital sexuality.⁽²⁾ However, a number of recent quantitative and qualitative research projects (Bajos et al., 1997; Ibaaquil, 2003;

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(1) The Emergency Contraception in Africa (ECAF) research team is presented in the introduction to this group of articles.

(2) In the Moroccan High Commission for Planning (HCP) survey, “Les jeunes en chiffres” (Young people in figures) published in 2012, sexuality was only addressed in one question: “Are you thinking of getting married?”. In urban areas, 57.6% of women and 34.1% of men aged 15-34 said yes.

L'Économiste, 2006) corroborate the results of the ECAF survey⁽³⁾ upon which this article is based.

In Morocco, despite the strict chastity norms applied to unmarried people, and the importance placed on female virginity, premarital sex is a reality in the early twenty-first century. It is true that the dominant social and religious order in Morocco is still based on such values as the honour and good name of the family group (Lacoste-Dujardin, 1985; Gadant, 1991). It still requires the repression of premarital female sexuality, an inheritance from a matrimonial system based on marriage without the consent of the parties involved, often at an early age⁽⁴⁾ for girls (Bouhdiba, 1975; Chebel, 2002, 2004). But this system has radically changed in recent decades, as a result of major upheavals in the functioning of Moroccan society (Vermeren, 2009; *TelQuel*, 2009). As in many African societies, the combined effects of economic crisis (making it hard for men to find a job to support a family) and greater access to education, particularly for girls, has led to postponement of marriage, especially in urban areas. Women's mean age at marriage rose from 17.5 years in 1960 to 25.8 years in 1994 and 26.2 years in 2004; it has continued to increase since then, especially in urban areas, but now appears to be levelling off at around 26 years (HCP, 2012; Ouadah-Bedidi et al., 2012). For men it rose from 24.4 years in 1960 to 30.2 years in 1998 and 32.1 years in 2004 (HCP, 2004) and stood at 31.4 years in 2012 (HCP, 2012).

At the same time, an increase in the proportion of women who are never-married at age 50 has been recorded, mainly in urban areas. The figure was 1% in 1994 (RGPH population and housing census), 6.8% in 2002 (RGPH) and 8% in 2010 (ENDPR multi-round demographic survey). This rise is confirmed by analysis of the behaviour of younger women: of female city-dwellers aged 30-34, only 2% were still unmarried in the 1960s, versus 22% in 1994 (Ajbilou, 1999). However, this does not reflect a declining interest in marriage similar to that observed in Northern societies: marriage is still of major importance for acquiring social status, especially for women, and has not been replaced by other recognized forms of union.

Higher levels of female school enrolment, longer time spent in education, and higher female labour market participation have also led to greater acceptance of marriages decided by the partners themselves. A Moroccan survey in 1995 showed that while 16% of all the women surveyed chose their first husband

(3) An EU-funded survey in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Morocco and Senegal; see the introduction to this issue of *Population*.

(4) To prevent girls marrying too early, the 1957 Mudawana (or family code) was reformed in 2004, setting the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 years for both women and men. A judge may still grant exemption however, and marriages involving under-age girls still take place in Morocco (Bernichi, 2008). The reform also abolished matrimonial guardianship and the obligation to obey the husband, established joint responsibility for the family, required consent from both spouses to a marriage and stipulated arrangements for divorce that disallowed repudiation (HCP, 2008). In theory if not in practice, it radically altered gender relations within the institution of marriage.

themselves, the proportion was 63% among graduates of higher education (CERED, 1997).

These recent changes have occurred in parallel with major upheavals in the family institution since the late twentieth century, namely an extremely rapid demographic transition (Tabutin and Schoumaker, 2005). Fertility in urban areas dropped from 5.5 children per woman to 4.3 in 1982, 2.6 in 1994, 2.1 in 2004 and 1.8 in 2010 (HCP, 2012). There are two related reasons for this striking decline, as elsewhere in North Africa: later age at first marriage and greater use of contraception by married couples. The contraceptive prevalence rate among married women aged 14-49 has risen from 19.4% to 50.3% over the last 30 years and continues to increase, exceeding 65% in urban areas in 2010 (Ouadah-Bedidi et al., 2012). As a result of population policy and the family models presented in the media, preference for a smaller family, with around two children, appears to have become widespread.

The changes revealed by all these indicators, particularly with respect to marriage, might initially suggest that the family norms and sexual practices of Moroccans are converging with those of the developed countries. In fact, the indicators cannot be used to support such a conclusion, because the gendered double standard⁽⁵⁾ persists, with no recognition of women's right to sexual freedom. The upheavals in the marriage market have not led to the development of “a new model based on the free choice of individuals of both genders” (Kateb, 2011).

In Morocco, as in many Mediterranean societies (Bardet, 1981), girls learn from early childhood that they are the repository of the family's honour and that an intact hymen is the irrefutable evidence of a successful upbringing. Rupture of the hymen (“defloration”), even accidental, still reduces a girl's chances of finding a husband, as reported by Naamane Guessous (1987). The requirement to enter marriage as a virgin,⁽⁶⁾ while less sacred than in the past, still remains a powerful social imperative (Mchichi Alami, 2000). Although sexuality is highly valued in Islam (Chebel, 2002, 2004), it is only socially permissible within marriage.⁽⁷⁾ Sexual relations before marriage are a violation not only of the moral and religious order, but also of the law.

The rising age at marriage for men and women rather suggests, however, that first marriage no longer systematically coincides with first sexual intercourse. This was already the case for young men, and now concerns young women

(5) The term “double standard” has long been used to indicate that sexual behaviour does not have the same social significance for women as for men, since men have greater freedom. Of course, this double standard is not limited to Morocco, but it is still current in that country and, above all, is never discussed.

(6) A man risks a 5-10-year prison sentence for taking a young woman's virginity, even with her consent. In some cases, he is forced to marry the woman.

(7) Under Article 490 of the Penal Code, “a sentence of from one month to one year's imprisonment shall be imposed on any persons of opposite sex, not joined in wedlock, who have sexual relations with each other” (Ministère de la Justice, 2007).

too. However, as we have said, there is a shortage of accurate data on this question, and on other illegal and stigmatized practices such as abortion⁽⁸⁾ and single motherhood. Such information does exist, however, in other countries with equally severe restrictions on sexual freedom, such as Senegal, Mali and the Comoros, as shown in these countries' DHS data. Official Moroccan statistics thus continue to implicitly consider the age of sexual debut as being age at marriage. Indeed, official sociodemographic surveys still do not ask any questions about sexuality to unmarried persons, even though the rare partial surveys of adolescent girls and boys all record premarital sexual debut, sometimes at an early age, especially among boys (CERED, 1997; Ibaaquil, 2003; Mellakh, 2002). The only "representative" local survey concerning young adult sexuality was conducted by the Moroccan newspaper *L'Économiste* in 2006, on a sample of 776 young people aged 16-29, including 386 women. According to this survey, 86% of young men and 34% of young women say that they had their first sexual relations⁽⁹⁾ before marriage.

Undeniably, the taboo on sexuality explains the extreme reluctance to explicitly examine sexual knowledge and practices among the general population, especially when such practices are illegal. Only a few sociologists have dared to do so (Bennani-Chraïbi, 1994; Dialmy, 1985, 1995, 2000, 2003; Naamane Guessous, 1987) and the field largely belongs to a few newspapers and magazines⁽¹⁰⁾ and sexologists (Kadri et al., 2001; Kadri et al., 2009). The *hushūmah* (a regional Arabic term combining the notions of taboo and prohibition) surrounding sexuality in Moroccan society, makes any straightforward research on these topics difficult. However, in recent years, some Moroccan women novelists (like their counterparts in Algeria, Tunisia, and elsewhere) have used the issue to denounce the hypocrisy that permeates their society (Bahéchar, 2000; Abu-Lughod, 2008).

One may suppose that in this situation, unmarried individuals live out a continual tension between their emotional and sexual aspirations, and the obligation to comply with the legal and religious norms that hold extra-marital sexuality to be deviant. However, new, more individualistic sexual models are now competing with the family model proposed by religion and tradition, so that sexuality is increasingly seen as a personal experience that may or may not be connected with the requirement to procreate. The need to reconcile this new aspiration with social and religious prohibitions explains why people may choose to react with a sort of "cultural improvization" (Bennani-Chraïbi, 1994) intended to give the impression of abiding by the rule while actually breaking

(8) Abortion is not explicitly forbidden in either the Qur'an or the Sunnah, but prohibition is the basic rule in Muslim countries, and in Morocco it is authorized only in cases where the mother's life or health are in danger. According to our respondents, both male and female, it is widely practiced, usually in acceptably safe but expensive facilities.

(9) With no details as to whether these were penetrative or non-penetrative.

(10) Such as the magazine *Telquel* (372, May 2009) with a survey entitled "The sexual explosion in Morocco" and *L'Économiste* (March 2006).

it, an improvization that does not have the same significance for both genders. This covert disobedience is also encouraged by more years of school attendance and women’s entry into the labour market, which makes it easier to meet the opposite sex.

This article uses material collected during the ECAF research project to analyse the processes of sexual debut among Moroccan men and women in order to reveal the “arrangements” between the sexes that these processes involve. Noting the ever wider gap between prescribed behaviour and actual practices, we first analyse the apparent consensus among men and women about the need to protect girls’ virginity, which justifies the arrangements adopted by partners to preserve it, mainly by practising non-penetrative sex which avoids the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI). We then examine how, beneath this consensus, a double standard persists concerning sexual debut. The final section studies how some individuals – more precisely, some women – break the taboo on premarital sex, to examine the cost of that transgression, which is very different for men and for women.

Methodology

The data used in this article are taken from the ECAF qualitative survey conducted from 2006 to 2008 on 50 women and 25 men aged 18-40, and on 23 reproductive health professionals (whose interviews are not used here), exclusively within the urban area of Rabat.⁽¹¹⁾ The survey was designed to assess the interest of making emergency contraception more available, by recording life histories and practices in the area of sexual, emotional and reproductive experience, and in the prevention of the risks associated with these new practices. The respondents were divided into three age groups (18-24, 25-34, 35 and above) and represented a variety of marital statuses (unmarried, married, divorce/widowed), educational qualifications (none/primary, secondary, higher) and socioeconomic groups (low income, moderate income, high income). All respondents had already had sexual relations.

Because of the sensitive nature of the topics addressed and to avoid outright refusal to take part in the survey, we mainly recruited respondents by “snowball sampling” from networks of acquaintances, the voluntary sector and hospital staff, and guaranteed anonymity by using fictitious first names. The multi-disciplinary survey team comprised four assistants (two men and two women) supervised by two researchers (one man and one woman), who were all trained in the topics of contraception, gender and the Moroccan family code.

To avoid variability due to the investigator effect, each individual involved was interviewed by a person of the same gender. The language used was generally Moroccan dialect, but some interviews were held in French with the

(11) This comprised the cities of Rabat, Temara and Salé, so as to avoid any excessive disparities associated with differences in rural ways of life, and to target areas with similar levels of contraceptive availability.

occasional word of Arabic. The interviews were recorded, transcribed literally and translated into French.

The semi-structured interviews began with a discussion of the link between the free choice of spouse and the success of a marriage, and collected information on emotional, sexual, reproductive and contraceptive life histories, focusing on the first and most recent relationships and the most significant intervening ones. We also recorded opinions and attitudes concerning marriage, sexuality, abortion, STIs and relations with healthcare providers. Socio-demographic data concerning the respondent and his/her partner were noted at the end of the interview.

For the purposes of this article, analysis focuses on the sexual debuts of men and women, irrespective of the stage they had reached in their sexual and family trajectory at the time of interview. This offers a retrospective view of developments in society, since some of our respondents began their sexual lives over twenty years ago and others during the year of the interview.

I. The consensus: abide with the rules while evading them, but always in secret

Most of the men and women interviewed shared the conviction that it is important for a woman to preserve her virginity at all costs as a guarantee for her marital future. This conviction appears to be generally shared in Morocco. A survey held for the purposes of a medical doctorate showed that 90% of the women interviewed considered that “virginity is a social duty to be upheld” (Mchichi Alami, 2000). The only exceptions were a few highly educated women from exceptional backgrounds who argued for sexual relations before marriage as a process of learning, knowing one’s partner and personal fulfilment.

The same conclusion may be drawn from the analysis of our data. At the same time, our respondents’ testimonies reveal that sexual debut before marriage is increasingly common, particularly among the younger cohorts, as might be expected from the rise in the marriage age. This debut occurs earlier for young men, who reported ages between 14 and 18, while women reported ages above 18. But age is not the only difference; the significance ascribed to the act and the way it usually occurs differ widely between genders. Young women’s priority remains marriage, and the major risk is the loss of their virginity, counter-balanced by the fear that refusing sexual relations will dissuade their suitor from marrying them. For young men, their sexual debut has two purposes: to become a man and be recognized as one, and, secondarily, to find a wife. The description of the first partner is thus not the same for both genders.

First partner as future husband for women?

For women, although their sexual debut does not systematically involve a promise of marriage, it usually consolidates an emotional bond of some sort. Agreeing to sexual relations sometimes serves to maintain that bond by yielding to the partner's demands, as this student explained at the outset when describing her first sexual relations at age 22:

It was a relationship of love. At the start, most of the time, it was so he could satisfy his needs, just that. There was no real pleasure. The relations were not penetrative, because I am still a virgin.

Hasnae (27, university student, unmarried but about to marry).

Few women recognized the difficulty of repressing their sexual urges until marriage, since needs of this kind are considered to be a male preserve. Some of our respondents did assert that women had the same desires as men and the same right to satisfy them. Meryem (24, no education, seamstress) speaking of her first relations at the age of 18 with the son of a neighbouring family, mentioned her active participation: "Even if he didn't ask, I went round to his house. It was all to do with adolescence and that sort of stuff", emphasizing that her own desires were quite natural.

But for the vast majority of young women, their narrative expresses not so much the desire to engage in sexual activity for the satisfaction it might bring, as the desire to prepare for union by getting to know their partner better. And the young men share this vision, at least with respect to their future wife, or any woman who might be considered suitable. Some sexual activity is necessary, but it mustn't be overdone.

Protecting virginity

The major arrangement between the sexes, in addition to the obligatory secrecy, is the practice of non-penetrative sex to preserve the young woman's hymen. This usually means mutual caressing⁽¹²⁾ leading to external ejaculation between the woman's thighs. This is often referred to by the respondents as a "*coup de pinceau*" (paintbrushing). By respecting the letter but not the spirit of the prohibition, this practice enables women and men to find a compromise between their conception of a satisfying relationship and compliance with the norms of the marriage market.

The value of preserving female virginity, as required by young women during their first sexual relations and until the marriage is settled, is largely undisputed by men. They consider it normal to respect the limitations laid down by their partners because the vast majority of men want to marry a virgin. Although some, more open-minded, may accept under certain conditions that their wife is perhaps not a virgin at marriage, they continue to consider

(12) Rather like "petting" in 1950s America, or current recommendations for "safer sex" (Fassin, 1997).

non-virginity to be highly objectionable, as illustrated by the remarks of Mustapha (30, unmarried, doorman):

I can accept it, as long as she's faithful to me. You forgive her past, there's nothing you can do about that. The past can't be repeated. What has happened has happened, on condition she respects you and understands that she has made a big mistake in her life. And if the man forgives her mistake, because it's a serious mistake, she must admire him, respect him and make his life happy, and there's no problem. I think no-one's going to say to you: I have married a girl who isn't a virgin. He'll protect her by telling you she was a virgin. It's awkward. It's about honour. He can't say to you, I found my wife was deflowered, spoiled.

Virginity before marriage is seen as a guarantee of fidelity in the future, says Rami (40, secondary schooling, night watchman, married, one child), and he thinks every man must check that his future wife has kept her hymen intact. Otherwise, he is likely to doubt her throughout their lives together:

Since it's a woman I am going to have marital relations with, I must know who she is, whether she has already slept with someone, if the thing [hymen] is still in the plastic wrapping as we say, or if the plastic has been torn... Otherwise I'll never feel easy with her. On my way to work, I'll start imagining things: she may go round to her lover, and do this and that. Our relationship won't be a hundred-per-cent successful, because there will always be doubts, and if there are doubts, you'll never feel easy in your life.

A more advantaged social status and university education have only a marginal effect on the importance men attach to the virginity of their future wives. Mounir, age 45, engineer, currently studying for a higher qualification in town planning, married to a graduate wife, also extols female virginity. He says he could not have married a non-virgin and in the future he would not allow his son to marry an "unsuitable" girl, in other words, a non-virgin. In his opinion, "women who have had sexual relations before marriage have behaved like prostitutes".

In some cases, protecting virginity may involve other sexual practices, such as anal relations: "After a year, our relationship became stronger and I used to make love with her from behind," recalls Ahmed (40, remarried, university education, businessman), whose partner was a virgin, but this behaviour was only rarely mentioned in our survey.

With few exceptions, most of the men and women interviewed believe that sexual practices that preserve virginity enable the partners to get to know each other better, to learn about sexual arousal, and, for men, to wait for marriage without too much frustration. While infringing the ban on premarital sexuality, the partners seek above all to preserve the practical evidence of compliance – virginity. Some women, more respectful of religious precepts, do not accept such practices. For Lamia, for example (30, unmarried, secondary education, seamstress), this form of non-penetrative sex, even when marriage is intended,

remains a "sin", and when faced with the desires of a man who promises to marry her, she accepts his advances in the hope of an official proposal, but refuses at the beginning to go further than a few kisses. She eventually gives in, however:

It is necessary to have sexual relations with him, but he must not touch the thing [virginity], so you won't get pregnant. This isn't sex like between a woman and her husband. I was still a girl [virgin], so it could only be superficial contact.

She also expresses the fear of an accident or of being abandoned after what, for her, amounts to breaking a taboo:

I don't feel easy, I'm afraid, I ask myself: what made me do that? There's nothing I can do, the man must marry me, I'll feel easy once he's my husband.

And so she waits impatiently for him to propose.

The apparent agreement between men and women concerning non-penetrative relations does not contradict the firm attachment to sexual double standards. Young women have almost no latitude if they wish to get married, and the reason men generally agree to "respect" the virginity of marriageable women is that they are able to find elsewhere, with others, the means to satisfy their desires for penetrative sexual relations.

II. Greater diversity in men's sexual debut

Whereas most young women's sexual debut, if it occurs before marriage, must be restricted to non-penetrative practices, this is not true for men. For them, first intercourse outside marriage has a different significance, seen more as a stage in their young lives and a way of proving their virility. Most men want to practise "full" sex, i.e., with penetration. This first penetrative intercourse is primarily a learning process, which can only come from a more experienced person or a sex worker. Depending on circumstances, this will usually be a divorced woman or a prostitute, either of whom may require some sort of recompense for this initiation (OPALS-Maroc, 1998). Few of the older men in our sample, whether graduates or illiterate, had not had been initiated in this way.

Ahmed (40, married, university education, businessman) considered his sexual initiation to be a sign of his becoming an adult:

I went to a brothel. Even if the person I had sex with was old enough to be my mother or even older, the desire and recklessness of youth, or rather childhood, made me close my eyes to all that... because it was the first intercourse in my life, and it had an effect: I had left the personality of a child and entered that of a man, I believe I had become a man.

A similar account from Abbas (37, married, illiterate, street hawker) about the prostitute with whom he had his first sexual relations:

She was a bit like a driving school, once I'd learnt to do it, I didn't need to have any more to do with her.

This event is reported by a number of young men as decisive, enabling them to deal with more important relationships in their sexual lives without the risk of appearing inexperienced. Penetrative sexual debut for men occurs early, involves older or professional partners, under definite peer pressure. Adil (32, unmarried, engineering graduate, computer cartographer), was given the services of a prostitute older than him as a 17th birthday present from his friends:

We were a gang of friends, we'd grown up together since primary school. For my birthday present they brought along a girl. That was my first sexual intercourse.

He did not really appreciate this "poisoned gift". He had been fortunate enough to have sex education lessons in his private secondary school, and knew the risks of unprotected sex. But his friends had brought condoms. Under their pressure, he gave in:

I don't have a very good memory of that first time, because I didn't want to do it. I felt no attraction towards that person. I didn't want to, but they had prepared everything. There were condoms.

Intergenerational differences

Although the practice of paying cash for first intercourse is common in all social groups, there are differences between generations. As mentioned above, almost all the older men in our sample had experienced sexual debut this way, along with those with the lowest sociocultural capital among the younger ones. The better-educated young men in our sample seem to have had easier access to non-commercial sex as part of a friendship or love affair:

I got to know her through her brother... My affair with her lasted about two months. I was 19 and she was 22.

(Rabie, 24, undergraduate, unmarried.)

Note that among the older cohorts, even where the attraction was mutual, the fact that "defloration" was a criminal offence dissuaded many men from courting young women. This is the memory of Ahmed (40, remarried, university education, businessman) who, as a teenager, began a relationship with a slightly older, virgin neighbour. He ended it when he realized that he could be sent to prison for satisfying his desire for penetrative sex:

When I realized and started wanting to do certain things, I wanted to look further afield... I learnt that a man can't contact a young virgin, because if she's deflowered, the man ends up in prison or has to get married, and I couldn't even afford to keep myself at that time.

Today, although the Penal Code has not changed, trials for defloration, except in cases of rape, appear to be less frequent; at all events, the risk is mentioned less often by our younger respondents.

Unlike older and less socially advantaged people, therefore, young men and young women usually have their sexual debut within a relationship involving non-penetrative practices. A young man's first partner is generally found among fellow students or near neighbours, with love affairs encouraged by co-education and the presence of more women in higher education. The two partners' ages and school careers are often similar.

Male accounts of first sexual relations are more similar in these cases to female accounts: mutual attraction, a courtship period of varying length turning to superficial contact within a context of emotional and physical closeness, even if marriage is not always envisaged.

More often, men combine the two forms of sexual debut: penetrative practices with older women and non-penetrative ones with "marriageable" young women. This was the case for Ahmed (42, businessman, son of a civil servant, graduate), currently married for the second time to a low educated woman six years his junior. He had his first intercourse at age 14 with a prostitute and paid for sex on a number of occasions afterwards. During his adolescence he had a relationship with his neighbours' daughter, a virgin, and they had sex without penetration for a year, and then anal relations. Later, he had a relationship with a fellow student, with penetration, using the rhythm method that he thought he understood. He admits he made a mistake, she got pregnant and he paid for an abortion. Then he met his first wife, with whom he had superficial and then penetrative relations after their engagement. With his second marriage, there were no premarital sexual relations.

The persistence of double standards consequently explains the consensus mentioned above: men find it to their advantage, since they can live the sexual life they may desire and still be entitled to a "good marriage" with a young virgin.

III. The cost of transgression

In the last fifteen or so years, many Moroccan women writers (Benayoun-Szmidt and Redouane, 2000; Benchekroun, 1999, 2005) have broken the silence concerning the traditional taboo about young women's virginity in modern society. With the scarcity of sociological studies on sexual practices in Morocco, "these women have helped to shed light on the often physically or symbolically violent patterns of gendered socialization strongly marked by tradition and male domination" (Charpentier, 2010).

A number of the young women interviewed for the survey were unmarried but no longer virgin and some married women had lost their virginity before marriage.

Accidental loss

The loss of virginity is not always deliberate. Apart from cases of forced intercourse reported by some respondents, it is usually an unintended accident, but the price paid varies widely according to the circumstances, the woman's status and the type of relationship within which virginity was lost.

Meriem is an unmarried woman aged 24 living in the suburbs of Rabat with an occasional job in a clothing factory. Her first "serious" relationship began around the age of 18, with a neighbour slightly older than herself, with whom she was in love. Their relationship was totally secret, she went to his house and at first they had superficial sexual contact. But one day, in Meriem's words, they went too far and he "damaged" her. Although deeply shocked, she still continued with the relationship because she cared about him and hoped he would marry her, although he could not afford to keep a family. Since she was no longer a virgin, she agreed to have penetrative intercourse and bought contraceptive pills from a chemist's shop far from her home, so as not to be recognized. Her parents, knowing nothing of her affair with the neighbour, then decided to marry her to a cousin. She could not refuse and the engagement was announced. Shortly before the marriage, her future husband asked to have sex with her. He then saw that she was no longer a virgin. Amazed, he still agreed to say nothing and protect her secret from the family, and to marry her on condition they did not have intercourse and that they rapidly seek a divorce. Meriem reports that if he had "denounced" her, she would have killed herself for shame. So Meriem returned to live with her parents after the divorce. Although she sees herself as the main loser from her relationship with her neighbour, expressing this with some bitterness: "Did he lose anything? He suffered no damage. I'm the one who suffered the damage", she still hopes he will marry her, "to make it up". So she continues to see him, sometimes giving him cigarettes or food, because he is still not earning. She sometimes prostitutes herself to get a little money. She got pregnant (probably a failure to take the pill, or forgetfulness) and had a secret abortion with the aid of the only person who had ever helped her, her sister.

Siham, now 27 and studying computer science after giving up hotel school, also sees the loss of her virginity as a disaster. For her, a "girl with no honour is a girl who is lost". As happened to Meriem, her partner took her virginity by accident without her realizing it. Their affair has lasted for four years. A year after meeting the man, who is the same age, she agreed to have superficial contact. But during a doctor's visit she learnt that she had lost her virginity. Her present pretext is caused by her partner's lack of concern about marrying her, on the pretext that he does not make enough money in his present job to

afford to keep a family. This causes some tension between them. She is now refusing any sexual contact with him until he officially proposes marriage. Siham, like most educated city women of her age, is both modern and traditional at the same time. When she speaks of her desires, aspirations and future, she appears to know what she wants and where she is going. But when the conversation concerns her loss of virginity and her fear of her parents finding out, she becomes someone else. In her view, marrying and having children is an individual and social imperative: she must “act like other women, become like other women, stop being an exception”. She regrets her loss of virginity because she considers that an intact hymen is a guarantee for the future, including for her partner:

The most important thing about keeping your honour is that you are unworried, you can hold your head high and be proud of yourself. Tomorrow, he may spurn me, he may get married, I have no proof, I live in total fear every day... not many men will accept you as a “woman”... If someone decides to marry, he will want a virgin.

It is impossible to know whether her partner’s reluctance to propose marriage is really due to financial difficulties or rather, as in other cases mentioned by some male respondents, that he is not keen on marrying a non-virgin (even if he was the one who took her virginity). With only one or two exceptions, the men we interviewed clearly require their wife to be a virgin at marriage.⁽¹³⁾ Some lay great importance on this because they want to show their families that they respect tradition. Most agree to undergo the test of the “stained *sirwal*”⁽¹⁴⁾ on their wedding night, even highly-educated men.

For these two women who lost their virginity accidentally, the challenge is therefore to marry the man who took their virginity, because they are convinced that they will never meet a man who would agree to marry them without going through unbearable humiliation. Two other women in our sample, who lost their virginity by force, reacted similarly, fighting to get the rapist to marry them.

Less dramatic transgression

Other examples show a possible development in gender relations, whereby unplanned penetration is not seen as a disaster, particularly if marriage is intended. Selma (27, higher education, financial manager for the post office) faced this situation with her first and only sexual partner, who later became her husband.

(13) The small number of men who attached less importance to virginity, whether survey respondents or the partners of female respondents, had often lived abroad, although there is no real evidence that this was a determining factor. Level of education, on the other hand, does not appear to be a discriminator.

(14) The *sirwal* is the traditional long underwear worn by the bride on the wedding night. Usually white. It must be stained by blood from the ruptured hymen as evidence of virginity.

Born after her parents divorced, Selma grew up far from her father. At the age of 11, she lost her mother and was brought up by her grandmother and uncle in a highly traditional way: no evenings out, no holidays, no amusements. She studied finance at degree level and met her future husband on a train on the way to an internship. They exchanged telephone numbers and saw each other again while she was finishing her course. He was fifteen years older than her, had just got over a difficult divorce and often had to look after his children. With the collusion of her aunt, Selma was able to go out with her husband before the marriage. They even had sexual relations, first without and then with penetration. She lost her virginity but does not really know how it happened:

Unfortunately, at some point, we began to do it over and over again, so from time to time I began to bleed. Actually, I don't know how it happened, it began little by little, before we were officially engaged, then the last time was before the wedding. Afterwards, our relations became normal, with penetration.

At first she was very upset by this loss and tried to break off the relationship so as not to seem to be wanting marriage just because she was no longer a virgin. But the break did not last and they got married; they now have two children together and she considers herself to be very happy. She does, however, still think that virginity is a gift one should offer one's husband: even if she was "lucky" enough to marry the man who took her virginity, that is not the case for all young women:

It's important because it's like a little gift. I'm not saying that a girl who loses her virginity before marriage is a bad girl, far from it! And anyway, there are girls who keep their virginity but do dreadful things on the side. But I think that there is some reason that God gave us that.

Selma's case is instructive in two ways: it shows that virginity remains important, even for women who may break the taboo, and it involves a man who, unlike most of our male survey respondents, appears to place little importance on it. As Selma explains:

My husband isn't really "into virginity": he says that if the man has relations before marriage, why shouldn't the woman? and I know he says that because he really thinks it.

Deliberate transgression

For some young women, on the other hand, although there were few in our survey, losing their virginity is a deliberate act. Their breaking of the taboo is asserted as a right to sexuality and freedom that society should recognize for women, as it does in practice for men:

We're humans, the man is not the only one to have desires, even the woman has desires. If I have a desire, then I should assert it too. It's a normal thing to have sex, and I say that it's a natural right.

These are the words of Nidal (25, unmarried, student, part-time leader in a young people's voluntary association). She considers that the age of obsession with virginity is past, especially since hymen reconstruction surgery is always an option.⁽¹⁵⁾ "You get a simple operation done and then your hymen is repaired". She met her first partner while away on a training course. When they got back to Rabat, they saw each other for a while and then began a relationship with non-penetrative sex. After long discussions about sex, she suggested they go for it, but he refused:

I would say that it wasn't a problem, if we were going to have sex, you mustn't get fixated on the hymen, and he kept saying that I had to preserve my hymen.

She refused to be considered solely in terms of this one characteristic:

Whether the hymen is lost or is still there, I don't care, I think human beings should be judged on their personality, their education, their ideas, how they cope with society, because the hymen isn't everything, it's not the whole woman.

She managed to convince him and they had penetrative sex, but even though she is a youth leader and informed about unsafe sex, she used neither condom nor pill, only the rhythm method and withdrawal.

This example shows that non-penetrative sexuality can also be a challenge for public health policy. The safety it apparently presents for those who practise it is an illusion. During initial relations, even with only superficial contact,⁽¹⁶⁾ there is always a risk that they will end in penetration, resulting in even greater risk because no protection has been planned. Radia (31, secondary education, hairdresser) discovered after seven months of a relationship that she was no longer a virgin:

... until the day when after examining me the doctor told me I had lost my virginity. He said that I had sensitive skin and if I had felt nothing, it was because that can happen and you may even not bleed. And I hadn't bled.

After this medical confirmation, she agreed to have penetrative sex. Although Siham avoided pregnancy, Radia did not have that luck despite her vigilance, because her partner did not withdraw properly:

We were using calculation [rhythm method], because I wasn't taking the pill, I don't like it... but he didn't control himself. One month later, I was pregnant.

She was obliged to have an abortion from a gynaecologist, after trying to start her periods again on her own:

I used everything, herbs... So I drank an infusion of cinnamon and herbs,

(15) This type of operation does exist, but data about its frequency are scarce and few respondents mentioned it.

(16) Some women explained that this was insertion between the woman's thighs and sometimes inside the labia, rubbing against the vagina without penetrating it.

I saw a general practitioner, she was the one who caused me problems, she prescribed injections for me. And when I went to the chemist's and had the urine analysis, I found out that I was pregnant. At that point, I said to myself that I needed the gynaecologist.

Some young women see access to penetrative sexuality as a necessary stage in gaining experience, getting to know their partner better and favouring a successful marriage.

Rim (26, married, cardiologist, one child) talks explicitly of the need to test the partner and ensure sexual compatibility:

It's important because you need to know if you get on together, in every way, even physically.

Rim lived with the man she loved for three years before marrying and had penetrative sexual relations as soon as they felt ready. This, she says, was so as "to get to know him in every way and be sure that he was the one I wanted to live with". She is married to an architect, and her attitude is an exception among the Moroccan women we interviewed. She was brought up by her widowed mother and two older sisters and, quite unlike most of her female contemporaries, had an open education enabling her to distance herself from the behavioural norms required by Moroccan society. The eldest sister, married to a Frenchman with whom she cohabited before marriage, even teases the youngest for still being a virgin at age 19.

In Rim's view, relationships between men and women have developed in the right direction both legally and in the workplace, but a lot still has to be done, especially to "talk openly about things" and break down the taboos (sex before marriage, abortion). She sees having superficial sexual relations in order to preserve one's virginity as a social hypocrisy. However, her readiness to break the taboo has its limits: she would never have conceived a child outside marriage, not for her own sake but because of the consequences for the child, "always being pointed at, they would be unhappy in our society". To avoid being caught in that trap, she used the pill for six months, along with condoms, coitus interruptus and even emergency contraception after having unprotected sex during ovulation.

Kenza (27, unmarried, gynaecologist) also comes from a liberal family. Although she expresses the same opinions as Rim, she still emphasizes the continuing tension between social prohibitions and personal fulfilment that hangs over women who attempt to run their lives as they would wish:

I try to reconcile modernity and tradition as best I can, but it mustn't be at the expense of my well-being. And sex is an integral part of psychological well-being for a woman as much as a man.

Her history illustrates the difficulties she faced in her first relationship, with a man she was engaged to for a while, but did not eventually marry:

When I met him, I was still a virgin and that didn't last long. It wasn't even a

month after we first met that we had sexual relations. He couldn't accept the responsibility of taking a girl's virginity. So they weren't sexual relations in the real sense, but just superficial contact. My attitude is either I do it or I don't do it. I don't even remember how long it was before we had proper sexual relations with penetration.

But this decision to have penetrative relations was probably one of the reasons for the breakdown of the relationship. Kenza did not bleed during the first penetration and her fiancé suspected her of having had sexual relations before, although she said she had what is known medically as a “dilatable or complacent hymen”:

That's the real irony, I'm a doctor and I know what a complacent hymen is.

It was probably less the absence of bleeding than Kenza's attitude that caused her fiancé to break off the engagement. This sort of freedom, openly expressed and even demanded, does not always please men. “You're a very independent person, too free. I can't accept that”, he said to justify breaking it off.

The reaction of Kenza's fiancé shows that the prohibition has only been partially lifted and the concept of sex on an equal and mutual footing is not yet widespread. It can be found among a small number of women with high social capital, but rarely among men, even the most privileged.

Conclusion: arrangements that pose little threat to male domination

Listening to these women and men describing their sexual debut and their expectations with regard to romantic and sexual relations, one may question how far gender relations have really advanced in Moroccan society. The sociologist Soumaya Naamane Guessous, in a recent interview,⁽¹⁷⁾ was pessimistic, pointing out that this was less an advance in gender relations than a poorly controlled transformation:

In our society, you cannot talk of an advance, because that would imply movement from one stage to another. Rather it could be called a rapid, brutal upheaval. Which explains why we can't grasp this change and why there is such chaos in gender relations in our society.

The fact of living in a society where girls in urban areas have caught up with and even overtaken boys in certain areas of life, education especially,⁽¹⁸⁾

(17) In Hamid Berrada's television programme *Mais encore?* on Moroccan channel 2M, 29 September 2010.

(18) In Rabat, although 5.9% of women aged 15-24 have not attended school (compared with 2% of men), 36.7% have passed their secondary school certificate (35.8% of men) and women are increasingly present in higher education: 11.5% compared with 9.8% of men of the same age. The relevant Moroccan survey shows that parity was achieved in about the year 2000 (HCP, 2012).

has given rise to contradictions and tensions that create conflict and distress for both women and men, although the form they take may differ. Whatever their educational qualifications, girls are brought up by their families to accept submission and self-denial, while boys are brought up in the myth of virility and male superiority. But as economic crisis persists and more women stay in education and engage in a working career, they are beginning to challenge their inferior position, maintained in society through their family upbringing, especially now that movements for women's rights are gaining a wider audience, even in the Muslim society of Morocco (Mahmood, 2009).

The new "arrangement between the sexes" (Goffman, 2002) revealed in this article refers not only to individual behaviour but also to the responsibility of the state in family and public health policy. Denying the existence of sexuality outside marriage because some situations are unmentionable, makes it impossible to design measures to prevent unwanted pregnancies and STIs among young people (UNAIDS, 2004).

The apparent willingness of most Moroccan men and women to practise non-penetrative sex before marriage, whether with their future partner or not, influences their ideas about the likely risks of sexual relations. This may perhaps explain the lack of contraceptive precautions once virginity has been lost. However, non-marital pregnancy and motherhood are still considered to be socially shameful and can destroy a woman's future (Naamane Guessous and Guessous, 2005). The stigmatization of births outside wedlock is so strong that for almost all our respondents, abortion in the case of an unwanted pregnancy remains an option, and even a desirable one, whatever their gender or religious misgivings.

For those young women who decide not to break the taboo, the stigmatization of extramarital pregnancy ought to be a strong incentive to use contraception. But there is a combination of insufficient or even erroneous information (such as the alleged risk of sterility with hormonal contraception, even though it is available without prescription in chemists' shops) and the social impossibility for an unmarried woman of attending a family planning clinic. Whereas contraceptive prevalence among married women is among the highest in North Africa, unmarried women generally use a combination of methods that are less effective than hormonal contraception and that often require the participation of their partners. These are mainly the rhythm method and withdrawal, and only in exceptional cases the condom, particularly for sexual debut.

Men have their first sexual relations earlier, often with a prostitute. However, in these commercial relations they do not systematically use condoms to obtain dual protection against STIs and pregnancy, some out of ignorance, others

because they think they can “recognize risky partners by their behaviour”.⁽¹⁹⁾ In Morocco, as in other countries (Bajos and Ferrand, 2002), this under-use of condoms also reflects a reluctance to use them because they interfere with pleasure.

Although the new “arrangement between the sexes”, designed to reconcile respect for tradition with individual desires, appears to enjoy a certain consensus among men and women, it in fact confirms male domination by adapting it, notably by ensuring the recognition (by women too) of a man’s “right” to marry a woman who has not fully expressed her sexuality. It does not involve any real emancipation of women or any challenge to traditional relations between the sexes. However, it is clear from the number of women breaking the taboo that the remarkable advances made by women in education are a major factor of change. The simultaneous diffusion of education and of new models – criticized by traditionalists as being “imported” – has affected the gender and generational hierarchies (Fargues, 2003), and modified behaviour, but apparently only at the margins. The social model has not been transformed by this arrangement, any more than it has by lower fertility or reforms of the Moroccan family code (*Mudawana*): non-reciprocity in gender relations persists.

(19) Although Morocco is seen as a country with a low HIV prevalence (0.11% in 2009), the figure is rising rapidly and is 2.38% among sex workers (Ministère de la Santé Publique, 2010). A specific survey held in 2008 showed that 40% of female sex workers are not informed about the risks they run and 43.5% do not use condoms with their customers, some of whom are even prepared to pay more for unprotected intercourse (OPALS-Maroc, 1998).

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Fatima BAKASS, Michèle FERRAND, the ECAF team • SEXUAL DEBUT IN RABAT: NEW "ARRANGEMENTS" BETWEEN THE SEXES

The social and religious order in Morocco is still based on such values as the honour and good name of the family wherein premarital female sexuality is proscribed and an intact hymen is irrefutable evidence of a successful family upbringing. Using data from the 2006-2008 ECAF qualitative survey, this article shows that the combined effects of economic crisis (reducing young men's access to the labour market and their ability to support a family) and more widespread access to education (particularly for girls) have delayed age at marriage and encouraged the development of premarital sexuality. Unmarried people live out a continual tension between their emotional and sexual aspirations, and the need to observe the social and religious norms that hold extra-marital sexuality to be deviant. As sexual behaviour is increasingly perceived as an individual experience, so each young person engages in a sort of "cultural improvisation" made possible because sexual behaviour is not directly observable and social control is weakening amid rapid social change. The practice of non-penetrative sex is an innovative "arrangement" between the genders that enables them to contravene the ban on premarital sexuality and yet comply with the key requirement of female virginity.

Fatima BAKASS, Michèle FERRAND, l'équipe ECAF • L'ENTRÉE EN SEXUALITÉ À RABAT : LES NOUVEAUX « ARRANGEMENTS » ENTRE LES SEXES

Au Maroc, l'ordre social et religieux repose encore aujourd'hui sur des valeurs telles que l'honneur et le prestige du groupe familial qui proscrivent la sexualité féminine pré-nuptiale, et font de la préservation de l'hymen la preuve irréfutable de la réussite de l'éducation familiale. À travers l'enquête qualitative ECAF menée entre 2006 et 2008, l'article montre que l'effet cumulé de la crise (qui réduit pour les jeunes hommes l'accès au marché du travail et la possibilité d'entretenir une famille) et de la généralisation de la scolarisation (plus particulièrement des jeunes filles) a entraîné un retard de l'âge au mariage et favorisé le développement d'une sexualité prémaritale. Les individus non mariés vivent alors dans une tension continue entre leurs aspirations affectivo-sexuelles et le respect des normes sociales et religieuses qui considèrent déviante la sexualité hors union. La sexualité étant de plus en plus vécue comme une expérience individuelle, chacun est amené à opérer une sorte de « bricolage culturel », possible du fait que les actes sexuels ne sont pas directement observables et que le contrôle social fléchit avec les transformations de la société. Le recours à une sexualité non pénétrative apparaît alors comme un « arrangement » nouveau entre les sexes, permettant de transgresser l'interdit sur la sexualité pré-nuptiale tout en respectant l'élément essentiel : la virginité féminine.

Fatima BAKASS, Michèle FERRAND, el equipo ECAF • EL COMIENZO DE LA VIDA SEXUAL EN RABAT: LAS NUEVAS "RELACIONES" ENTRE LOS SEXOS

En Marruecos, el orden social y religioso reposa hoy todavía en valores como el honor y el prestigio del grupo familiar que proscriben la sexualidad femenina prenupcial, y hace de la preservación del himen la prueba irrefutable del éxito de la educación familiar. Apoyándose en la encuesta cualitativa ECAF conducida entre 2006 y 2008, este artículo muestra que el efecto acumulado de la crisis (la cual reduce en los hombres jóvenes el acceso al mercado del trabajo y la posibilidad de fundar una familia) y de la generalización de la escolaridad (en particular de las jóvenes) ha provocado un retraso de la edad al matrimonio y favorecido el desarrollo de una sexualidad premarital. Los individuos no casados viven una tensión continua entre sus aspiraciones afectivo-sexuales y el respeto de las normas religiosas y sociales que consideran como desviada la sexualidad fuera del matrimonio. Puesto que la sexualidad es vivida cada vez más como una experiencia individual, cada uno esta conducido a operar una especie de "bricolaje cultural", posible por el hecho que los actos sexuales no son directamente observables y que el control social se debilita con las transformaciones de la sociedad. El recurso a una sexualidad no penetrativa aparece así como un nuevo tipo de "relación" entre los sexos que permite transgredir la prohibición de la sexualidad prenupcial, pero respetando lo esencial: la virginidad femenina.

Keywords: sexuality, virginity, gender relations, male domination, Morocco.

Translated by Roger Depledge.