

Fatiha has agreed to tell her story.

She enters the room dressed in a pink djellaba, with a colourful scarf wrapped around her hair. She lowers her gaze to the floor, then with a low voice begins talking. She doesn't wish anybody to undergo the same fate as hers. She feels very guilty, because she gave birth to a baby while unmarried. Her family has sent her away. Apparently her kith and kin couldn't bear the shame and decided not to be contaminated by Fatiha's presence anymore. She fled to Casablanca where she expected to be anonymous and find a job. Now she supports her baby and herself, working as a domestic worker for a middle class Casablancan family. She is fortunate to be able to leave her baby during the day in the *crèche* run by the NGO *Terre des Hommes*.

Fatiha is not the only unwed mother struggling to raise a child and earn a living while cut off from all social and affective ties. Like her, many young women have become pregnant against their will; but the phenomenon of unwed mothers is not formally recognised, and little is done to enable them to live in security and dignity. In a country where 40% of women aged 25-29, 21% aged 30-34, 12% aged 35-39 and 6% aged 40-44 remain unmarried, and where literacy and sex education are very poor, why is there no political commitment to prevent unmarried motherhood and to provide for services to take care of socially excluded unwed mothers and their children? Are we to follow official documents and blindly accept that sex out of wedlock is prohibited by law and doesn't occur and that therefore there is no such phenomenon as unwed mothers?

In 1995, I participated as an external expert in an evaluation

team to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of EC-financed projects in some Mediterranean non-member countries. This mission took me to Morocco to visit twelve public hospital maternity sections where *post-partum* family planning activities were to be initiated. As always in these official missions, I was warmly received by the heads of the public hospital maternity wards and accompanied by the project leader from the Ministry of Public Health. Many of the wards were rehabilitated, and the women who had just delivered were exposed to a "happy family message" from Philips video monitors above their beds.

In my (other) role of women's health and rights advocate, I systematically asked the head of the maternity ward if they cared for unwed pregnant women in their services. Without exception they invited me to see them. We then proceeded to back rooms lacking video monitors. Very often the accompanying doctor disdainfully told me that these ignorant women were the shame of the community. He also told me that these women were denounced to the police as soon as they entered the maternity section in order to prevent them from fleeing and abandoning their newborn child.

In some maternity sections, I was taken to a room with abandoned babies. In one of the hospitals I saw a room with 15 to 20 abandoned toddlers up to four years old who were growing up within the walls of the maternity section. From the hospital's perspective, the denouncement of unwed pregnant women in order to prevent the abandonment of babies makes sense. Nonetheless, the disdainful behaviour of the medical and paramedical staff towards these women left an indelible mark on my mind.

Three years later in 1998, setting up a research project on sex education and contraceptive use among Moroccan women, the unwed mothers crossed my path again. This time, I heard the follow-up of what I had left behind in 1995. As soon as an unwed mother leaves the public hospital maternity section, she is convoked by the police. There she will learn that she is guilty of immorality (*al-fasâd*) and that she will be judged by the tribunal. Theoretically she risks imprisonment of up to three months or a fine up to 2000 dirhams. I felt indignation. How could one judge and imprison a mother of a newborn baby who, because of her position as a unwed mother, is already excluded from her family?

My research on sex education and contraceptive use among three generations of Moroccan women gave new impetus to the need to address the issue of unwed mothers in Morocco. From research conducted in Casablanca in the spring of 1998, it became clear not only that "ignorant" women did not know how

to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, but that many women, independent of age and class, were not knowledgeable about their physiological functioning in matters of reproduction and sexuality. Women dispose of approximate knowledge in these fields, information garnered from hearsay and from ideas proclaimed by informal "leaders". The narrative pattern of "I've just heard," "They told me," or "I hear (said)" are widespread.

Although many young women are now attending schools (80% of women under 25 in our research), sex education is only provided in a technical way during lessons of natural history. It does not prepare or enable young girls to negotiate safe sex and to effectively protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. In our research 39% of unmarried women were mothers. And 75% of the unwed mothers told us that they became pregnant against their will. Only 10% of the unmarried women ever used the pill, but when asked if they regularly used it, the answer was negative. Two of them said that their relationship had broken up, two others told us that their partners did not want them to use any method, while the others related various stories about the difficulties of access to the pill when not married.

If a woman goes to the public family planning services, she is supposed to bring along the family health booklet. The service provider will write down the reason and the date of the consultation and by so doing infringe the right to privacy of the young girl. Although the pill can be bought at the pharmacy without a medical prescription, a visit to the pharmacist will not go unnoticed by other people. Social control is all-encompassing and effective in maintaining the moral order: young (unmarried) women are not expected to have sex!

This moral code, enforced by law, impedes the provision of clear and unambiguous information to young women. Mothers to whom we talked shouted that they never would address the subject of sexuality and contraception with their unmarried daughters for "who says contraception, says prostitution!". Although daughters expressed the desire to be informed by their mothers, they have to lower themselves to the role of eavesdroppers. They pick up information when they hear women talk among themselves, often mothers with friends and neighbours. A whole category of young women are thus uninformed, or badly informed. This lack of information has a tremendous social impact.

Traditionally girls were, and in rural areas they still are, married before or just after their first menstruation. A virgin girl

(*bint*) immediately thereby becomes a *mra*', a sexually active woman. In the distinctive stage between the age of her first menstruation and her marriage, a woman is referred to as "single" (*'azba*). This socio-cultural construction of gender restricts the liberty of women. Let me explain. An *'azba* is a potential candidate for marriage. She has to behave decently. If she loses her virginity, she is a bad woman and stigmatised as a prostitute. An *'azba* who fails to get married before the limit of the acceptable nuptial age of 25 will enter the denigrated category of "spinster" (*bayra*). Unmarried women between 20 and 25 are "vulnerable" to the seductions of men, because they want to attain the ultimate goal in a woman's life: to get married and become a sexually active woman, a *mra*'. This social pressure makes them give in to men's sexual demands out of wedlock. Since the socio-cultural construction of male gender does not depend on sexual activity and reproductive capacities there is an intrinsic gender inequality.

In a country like Morocco where the time span between the age at first menstruation and the age at first marriage is increasing, many young sexually mature women have to meet the social and legal norm of being a virgin up to their wedding night. At the same time, these women are under social pressure to find a good candidate for marriage. Women who approach the limit of the conventional age of marriage (25, but some now say up to 30) are especially "vulnerable" to men's advances. Many men use this "vulnerable" category of women to satisfy their sexual needs. The more so since they are sure not to catch a sexually transmitted disease while having sex with a virgin. These young women are poorly informed about the physiological functioning of their genital organs. Furthermore, these young girls encounter many barriers in gaining access to ways to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Sexuality and all that surrounds it is a taboo subject for this social category.

Single mothers in Morocco are to be found throughout society, especially where women are socially and economically unprotected by their kin: domestics, workers in the fishery industry who have to work night shifts, agricultural labourers. And one should not forget the other side of this not-so-brilliant coin—the "natural" or illegal children who are potential "street children".

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