

## **Taboo Topics? Women, Adolescents and Artisans**

**Susan Schaefer Davis**

Independent Scholar and Consultant

**Abstract:** While these topics are far from taboo today, when I first tried to do research on rural Moroccan women in the late 1960s, I was told funding would not be granted; apparently gender was not a serious topic. Awarded a grant for another topic, once in Morocco I felt compelled to pursue gender. But on return to the US, the granting agency asked me to refund them my grant! Fortunately, my advisor supported me, and my research became an early book on women in Morocco. Adolescents and artisans were less “controversial” topics, but limited research existed in both areas. Findings on Moroccan adolescents included large gender differences in normative behavior, sexual practices, and changing gender relations. Previous work on artisans concerned products, not the producers; my work includes both. It provides insights into how weavers feel about pricing rugs, or using natural dyes, or why and how women might form a cooperative to make jellaba buttons. This article describes difficulties encountered in dealing with these topics, and important findings resulting from being able to do so.

**Keywords:** Gender, Women, Empowerment, Adolescence, Sexuality, Artisans, Weaving.

### **Introduction**

In this special issue on anthropology in the Maghrib, I want to highlight some ‘new’ themes that I have worked on. These are gender, adolescence, and artisans and their production in Morocco. I will examine the difficulties, which sometimes felt like taboos, that I encountered when working with them, and some interesting findings from engaging them.

While this issue examines thematic and theoretical (dis)continuities between the colonial and the postcolonial anthropologies of the Maghrib, my work is not influenced so much by a colonial/postcolonial divide, but rather by the cultural changes of second wave feminism in the 1960s, and later interest in youth, and in artisans and their work. In fact, my interest in gender began with my Peace Corps service in a rural Moroccan women’s center in 1965-67, not long after the end of French colonial control of Morocco from 1912 to 1956. It is true that colonial anthropology had less interest in gender than in more utilitarian political and economic aspects of the culture, but I would posit that the exploration of gender was driven by a Western focus on feminism, also adopted by native anthropologists. Fatema Mernissi, whose

Ph.D. (from Brandeis University in the US) became *Beyond the Veil* in 1975, is a prime example.<sup>1</sup>

What follows explores the challenges, changes and discoveries I experienced in studying gender, adolescence and artisans and their products.

### Gender

My work on gender in Morocco provides the clearest example of the change in this ‘new’ theme over time.

I was inspired to become an anthropologist by working with rural Moroccan women, who did not fit the Western stereotype of ‘meek, weak and whiny’ individuals. Instead, while teaching home economics skills in a semi-rural women’s center, I found intelligent, articulate, and outspoken women who often got what they wanted. I pursued a degree in anthropology at the University of Michigan to better understand this difference, and planned to explore it in my doctoral research. However, in the late 1960s, my advisor said I would never get grant funding for such a topic, and I instead applied for a Fulbright to explore patron-client relations or the push-pull aspects of migration – I don’t recall which, illustrating my level of interest. I did receive a Fulbright and went off to Morocco to begin my research – and found the women still so fascinating that I could not ignore them. Fortunately, my advisor allowed me to change topics after receiving a detailed outline of my plans. I proceeded...but on return to the U.S., Fulbright asked me to refund them my grant! Clearly there was little interest in gender in the early 1970s. Luckily my advisor supported me, I did not have to refund the grant, and my research became an early book on women in Morocco, *Patience and Power*.<sup>2</sup>

While writing my dissertation in the early 1970s, the lack of sociological or anthropological academic interest in gender was also a challenge. To find comparable information in English on Muslim women, I had to order a dissertation from University Microfilms on Muslims in India. Later I found Hilma Granqvist’s work on Palestinian women;<sup>3</sup> although outside North Africa, it was inspiring. Her detailed look at women’s lives fit well with my perspective. Later I examined the literature in French and found Goichon’s

---

1. Fatema Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1975).

2. Susan Davis, *Patience and Power: Women’s Lives in a Moroccan Village* (Rochester, VT: Schenkman, 1983).

3. Hilma Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village*, vol. 1 (Helsingfors: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1931); Hilma Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village*, vol. 2 (Helsingfors: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1935).

sociological study of Algerian women's lives in the Mزاب in 1927.<sup>4</sup> One little recognized but still-useful benefit of this past disinterest in studying women, growing out of the idea that they are not important, is that it is often easier to get state permission for such research, since it is assumed it could have no crucial political consequences.

However, from the early 1970s until now there has been a huge change in the amount of anthropological and sociological literature on gender in North Africa, by both native and foreign ethnographers. There is certainly too much to cite here, but readers can get an overview of the first twenty years in the Middle East in the volume edited by Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker.<sup>5</sup> Work by foreign authors was more often specifically anthropological, while that of natives was usually called sociological since there were often no departments of anthropology – but both focused on social aspects. However, language, reflecting one's training, seemed to make a difference. I found that literature written in English often contained more specific information about culture and its practices, while that in French more often seemed philosophical with less of what I considered 'real data.' For example, works in English contained information on the gender division of labor, while those in French might discuss the viability of uses of philosophy in the Arab mind.

Another indication of greater interest in gender was the formation of groups with that focus. In the US, the Association for Middle East Women's Studies (AMEWS) was founded in 1985 by several of us scholars interested in promoting quality research on women in the Middle East, spearheaded by Suad Joseph. In a general atmosphere of little interest, it was wonderful to meet with others and discuss our work. Early on there was a newsletter, and in 2005 *The Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* (JMEWS) published their first issue as the official publication of AMEWS. Although both have 'women' in their titles, it should be noted that more recently studies of masculinity are appearing. While scholarship on gender in North Africa has flourished, at a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting of AMEWS in 2010, a group discussing progress in the field agreed that although there was great academic progress, the general public was still quite ignorant on the topic and held naive, outdated stereotypes. Abu-Lughod's book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving* addresses these stereotypes – and their political ramifications.<sup>6</sup>

---

4. A. M. Goichon, *La vie féminine au Mزاب: Étude de sociologie musulmane* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1927).

5. Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker, eds. *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Perseus, 1999).

6. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

My work on gender has addressed and tried to overcome these stereotypes, and to add to our knowledge of Moroccan women in general. One means of doing this is focusing on ways in which Moroccan women have power, evident in the title of my post-dissertation book *Patience and Power: Women's Lives in a Moroccan Village*.<sup>7</sup> To do this, I redefined power in a way that could apply to all, not just authority figures. Then, I found ways to observe its use by women, and noted how it worked. My admiration for women later led me to practical work with them, both as a consultant on their roles in economic development and starting my own 'development project' to sell their rugs on the internet.

The first article I published was the life story of Zahrah Mohammed,<sup>8</sup> which appealed to me because of the strength she demonstrated as a young woman running away from an arranged marriage she didn't want and marrying the man she did – in the 1940s! It also 'foreshadows' my later work in that it is based on an interview with someone I knew well who trusted me to tell her story, included revealing data about her life, and used many of her own words.

My interest in the women's power I saw in Zahrah and others in the small town of Zawiya led me to redefine power. It commonly only referred to the state and its representatives like the mayor or policemen, but I wanted a more general term that could apply to all people. So I used power to mean the ability to control one's own life and behaviour, and those of others, which was a much broader and more useful definition. More recent works refer to this as having agency.

Then I needed to clarify ways for others to see this power as I had. Earlier descriptions of Muslim women often presented them, if seen at all, as appearing only to serve food to guests, eyes cast down and quickly leaving the room, contributing to the stereotype. This grew out of the seclusion of women from unrelated men (local and foreign), who were unable to see their much richer lives as I, and other women, could. It also was a formal or recognized and well-defined, prescribed role for these women.

The method I found to observe ways in which women had power was to describe both their formal and non-formal roles. They of course had power in some formal, recognized roles, as in controlling the lives and behavior of

---

7. Davis, *Patience and Power*.

8. Susan S. Davis, "Zahrah Muhammad, A Rural Woman of Morocco," in *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, Elizabeth Fernea and Basima Bezirgan, eds. 201-17 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977).

their young children and daughters-in-law, or as teachers in a classroom. But they also had power in less recognized non-formal roles. Non-formal roles are also regularly occurring behaviors, thus roles, but they are not recognized as such and thought perhaps to be idiosyncratic. Only by closely observing many aspects of women's lives do these roles become visible. Female ethnographers have a distinct advantage in Muslim and many other cultures, since usually males do not have this kind of access. Muslim males will have some access to the women in their families, but usually not to most or all spheres as women do.

A few examples of women's non-formal power will help illustrate. My husband (doing different doctoral research) and I lived on a local street. Our village neighbours had eight children, and one night we invited the parents to dinner. It was a comfortable event, with all eating together and the wife not shy but contributing to the conversation since she knew us well. At the end of the evening she said "I've wanted birth control pills for months, and he won't get me any." The next day, she got her pills. While this may seem to be just one event, I saw repeated examples of women "hanging out the dirty laundry" or making private information public in order to shame men into doing something. Another example was less successful. A young woman had gotten pregnant by a neighbour boy, and was confined to her room to keep this a secret. One day she escaped, and went to the crowded taxi stand at the base of town and loudly told her story – hoping to shame the boy, and his family, into marrying her. In this case it did not work, but she was using the same tactic.

Another way women have power, especially over their husbands, is their use of magic, either in spells or in using magical substances (...) and sometimes there are suspicions of poison. But what is effective is the threat. I was once asked by the husband in a local family close to us to cook for him. This had never happened before and the wife was a good friend too, so I asked her to be sure it wouldn't upset her. She said no, go ahead (...) and explained the details. There had been a vaccination campaign at the local school, people had gotten unruly, and the police had been called. Her husband was often with them, and was that day. When the police began to berate his wife and daughter for their involvement, he did not defend them – and they were angry. Because of this, he was not eating anything his wife cooked for a couple of days until she cooled down. In this case she didn't immediately control his behaviour to make him defend her – but he would think about it carefully if the occasion arose again.

It should be noted that not only women use magic or spells. A local religious teacher threatened a bridegroom with impotence by putting a spell in his path on his traditional horseback ride to the mosque before the wedding unless he was paid a healthy sum. The groom did not pay (...) but put his brother on the horse, his face covered with the hood of his robe as was traditional. One expects the influence of magic may have decreased since the 1980s, with increased Western-style education, although Mernissi described female university students as suspecting that magical spells by someone jealous were preventing them from marrying in the 1990s (personal communication).

While local people do not talk overtly about women's power, there is a cultural clue in the fact that the most famous and feared *jinn* or spirit in Morocco among the rural people I know is Aicha Kandisha, whose name some local people even feared to mention since it might summon her. She appears as a beautiful woman with long hair, but if you look closely she has cloven feet. However, allegedly many men do not look and she seduces them, after which they are impotent.

Many people later became interested in women's power, seen in a focus on the term "empowerment" which began to appear in much of the literature on gender after 2000. As I explored it, I was disappointed to find that many authors used it in a vague or undefined way. Two colleagues and I examined the literature and found that a useful synthesis was that empowerment means that women can make individual and collective choices as active agents that produce desired outcomes for them and their communities. Collective choices involve women working together as a group to overcome social structures or customs that limit them.

We went on to describe ways in which NGO work and economic development projects can produce such empowerment at a micro level for individuals or communities. A few illustrative examples will clarify this. As a result of NGO-provided training on human and legal rights, some young women refused early marriages, and others reported domestic violence to local authorities, something they didn't dare do in the past. Collectively, some women formed discussion and support groups as women victims of violence, helping each other learn how to deal with this issue. With participation in economic development projects, some individual women said earning an income gave them more say in family economic decisions. Collectively, women in a group meeting wondered how they might get their husbands (who received the payment) to give them more of the profit from rugs they sold. One wise older woman said, "[w]e could tell them that if they gave us a

little something for each sale, we would be motivated to work faster to finish the next rug.” At a subsequent meeting, women were asked if any had tried this, and several hands went up; the group found a solution that helped the members to at least modify a local tradition.<sup>9</sup>

While I have continued my interest in and writing about Moroccan women, after about ten years I left academia and instead worked as a consultant on women’s roles in economic development with organizations like the World Bank, the UN, and USAID; my fluency in Moroccan Arabic was a great help. My interest in the hands-on, practical aspect of women’s lives began with my Peace Corps experience, and I found that consulting work combined that with a series of academic-like research projects involving interesting practical problems to solve, which I enjoyed. My favorite was the evaluation of a drinking water project in southeastern Morocco for the World Bank with a team of 22 Moroccans; we found it was indeed working and because of that the project was extended to another area so more women and their families had access to clean, nearby drinking water.

In addition to consulting, in 2001 I began my own “development project” related to gender, by selling rugs online directly from women in two villages, pro bono. I wanted the women, not merchants, to reap the profits of their work, and for them to have access to the worldwide market. I began selling Moroccan rugs online in 1994, but they were purchased from shops and I profited. That provided a trial of the concept to be sure it worked before involving local women. Once I saw it did, I found women in a southern village who all did excellent work: I couldn’t work with only some women, or it would cause dissension. In 2002 I found another village in the Middle Atlas with a different weaving style, and added them to my site under Women Weavers OnLine.<sup>10</sup> I visited each village, took photos of the weaver and her rug/s (there was so much interest I later had to limit them to one each), did a brief bio and got the rug price and dimensions, and put all on the internet. In each village I had a local assistant who I could contact about rug availability and to do shipping, and who I hoped would eventually replace me. While it sounds very straightforward...it was actually quite complex. Those interested can read about the details in my previous work.<sup>11</sup> This project lasted until

---

9. Stephanie Willman Bordat, Susan S. Davis and Saida Kouzzi, “Women as Agents of Grassroots Change: Illustrating Micro-Empowerment in Morocco,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 7, 1 (2011): 90-119.

10. See: <http://www.marrakeshexpress.org/weaversoverview.html>.

11. Susan Davis, “Women Weavers OnLine: Rural Moroccan Women on the Internet,” in *Gender and the Digital Economy: Perspectives from the Developing World*, eds. Cecelia Ng and Swasti Mitter (New Delhi, London: Sage Publications, 2005).

2016, when I learned of a similar project to sell online, but which had many artisan groups and aimed to become independent of foreigners and have artisan leaders. That project is called Anou which means water well in the Tamazight dialect of Berber and can be seen at <http://www.theanou.com/>. I referred the weavers I worked with to Anou, where they enrolled as Association Timnay, and I 'retired' from the project.

### Adolescence

Youth seemed to be a less 'taboo' topic than gender, that is, without clear opposition to, or strategic interest in, studying it. However, since Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*,<sup>12</sup> little anthropological work had focused on adolescence, especially in North Africa. Some works dealt with growing up or marriage in Egypt<sup>13</sup> and Palestine,<sup>14</sup> but not on adolescence specifically. One reason for the more recent interest, and grants, were the problems of American adolescents. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in the US awarded Harvard University a grant to study adolescence cross-culturally, based on Beatrice and John Whiting's study of childhood in six cultures;<sup>15</sup> the Whitings and Irven DeVore supervised the work. Research was done in seven groups with varied kinds of cultural practices: Australian Aborigines, Arctic Inuit, Kenyan Kikuyu, Muslim Thai fishermen, Romanian peasants, Nigerian Ijo, and rural Moroccan Arabs. My husband and I, an anthropologist-psychologist team, were chosen to work in Morocco. The goal was to collect comparable data on all seven cultures. We examined physical, social, and psychological aspects of adolescence. The project produced four books, on the Inuit,<sup>16</sup> Aborigines,<sup>17</sup> Ijo,<sup>18</sup> and Moroccans.<sup>19</sup>

We noted the physical aspects of adolescence in order to include youth at the same stage across the seven cultures studied. However, measuring physical development was difficult and could have been another taboo. The

12. Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1928).

13. Hamed Ammar, *Growing Up in an Egyptian Village* (Oxon, England: Routledge, 1954).

14. Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village*, vol. 1; Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village*, vol. 2.

15. Beatrice Whiting, ed., *Six Cultures: Studies of Child Rearing* (Hoboken NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 1963); Beatrice Whiting and John Whiting with Richard Longabaugh, *Children of Six Cultures: A Psycho-Cultural Analysis* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

16. Richard G. Condon, *Inuit Youth: Growth and Change in the Canadian Arctic* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

17. Victoria Katherine Burbank, *Aboriginal Adolescence* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

18. Marida Hollos and Philip E. Leis, *Becoming Nigerian in Ijo Society* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

19. Susan S. Davis and Douglas A. Davis, *Adolescence in a Moroccan Town* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).



appearance of secondary sexual characteristics are the best indicator but were too personal for researchers to observe precisely, and an examination by a doctor would have discouraged most local youth from participating due to embarrassment or fear. We settled on measuring where each adolescent was in their growth spurt, determined by weighing and measuring them at the start and end of the study, a period of about a year. However, we needed to decide who to include before we had these data, so selected boys and girls from the ages of nine to twenty. With the growth data and being able to ask sensitive questions later in the research, we found that girls reached menarche at about age fifteen, based on their fasting the month of Ramadan, and boys felt mature enough to fast at seventeen, often coinciding with beard growth.<sup>20</sup>

Many interesting findings came out of our research on Moroccan adolescence in 1982 and 1984. One was that there was no clear term rural people used for adolescent or adolescence, so to begin with it was very difficult to explain to local people what we were doing. When we met with families in the neighborhood we planned to study, we said we were doing research on ‘children who were not really small, not really big.’ There is a phrase in Modern Standard Arabic that educated people in the cities knew, *sinn al-murāhaqa* or the years of adolescence. But in the 53 families we studied, only two parents had completed primary school, and people did not know this term. A few of the more educated youth knew it, but it was not used commonly. We asked adolescents about life stages, and some used *shabāb* or youth and some ‘*azri* and ‘*azba*, bachelor and virgin, but these do not correspond precisely to adolescence – both may range well into the twenties. Another rural-urban contrast we noted was that when we told urban people we were studying adolescence, they rolled their eyes and indicated it was a difficult time, which none of the rural families did once we made it clear which age group we were studying. Thus, one could say that in Zawiya, the small semi-rural north central Moroccan Arab town we worked in, there was not a clear concept of adolescence as a life stage in the early 1980s.

Looking at the social aspects of adolescence, we found people’s orientation was to the group, basically the family, rather to the individual as in the US. For example, when most Moroccans meet they want to know what family and area you are from, while Americans ask ‘what do *you* do?’ One effect of this was that we found less parent-youth conflict than we expect in the US. Moroccans don’t feel a need to establish themselves as individuals in opposition to their parents. For example, they don’t say “It’s *my* life; I can

---

20. Davis and Davis, *Adolescence in a Moroccan Town*, 43-46.

smoke if I want to” but rather respect their parents and don’t go against their wishes...at least openly. They avoid confrontations out of respect, but often do what they want later, on their own or with friends. Speaking Moroccan Arabic fluently and having lived in the village off and on since 1965, I was well known and trusted in the community. For this research, I lived on a street in the study area and did not witness, hear about, or overhear heated discussions of teens with parents. Indeed, male friends in their 40s who were heavy smokers never smoked in front of their fathers out of the same deference.

One might also expect some conflict because almost no parents had gone to school and nearly all adolescents had; this could lead to different views on many things, but it was not the case. Young people generally respected their parents and followed their wishes. We saw clear examples of this when we asked in a confidential interview who should choose their spouse. A majority (55 percent of males and 64 percent of females) said the parents should choose. Youth who wanted to choose their own spouse were usually older and/or more educated.<sup>21</sup> Almost none would oppose the parents openly, though a few said they would run away with that person. More common was the construction of an elaborate compromise, for example acting ill and getting a doctor to tell the parents that they would only recover if they could marry the person they wanted. Open conflict was avoided. Young people also said that if they went against their parents’ wishes, they would lack family support in case of marital problems. A group is involved, not just the two individuals.

While general study of adolescence was not a taboo topic, asking adolescents about their sexuality and actual sexual behavior outside marriage were taboo – as they would be in almost any area.<sup>22</sup> How did we get data on this topic? We did not ask individuals about their experience – but about what they knew or had heard about others (which is the same strategy John Waterbury used for his data-rich political study *Commander of the Faithful*).<sup>23</sup>

The following quote presents an overview of our study:

“The most striking features of adolescent sexuality in Zawiya today center on three factors. First, there is a clear *double standard*, in which males have a good deal of sexual freedom and are assumed to be sexually active, while females are much more restricted in opportunities for sexual activity and are expected to remain virgins until marriage. Second, there

21. Davis and Davis, *Adolescence in a Moroccan Town*, 126.

22. Douglas A. Davis and Susan S. Davis, “Sexual Values in a Moroccan Town,” in *Psychology and Culture*, eds. Walter J. Lonner and Roy S. Malpass (Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, 1993), 226.

23. John Waterbury, *The Commander of the Faithful: The Moroccan Political Elite – A Study in Segmented Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

is a much greater *range* of sexual practices by males than by females, including homoerotic play and masturbation. Finally, courtship, sexual values, and marriage choices are undergoing significant and rapid *change* as a result of increased access to education and electronic media.”<sup>24</sup>

Examples from our research illustrate these three factors.

Although schools are mixed gender in Morocco and students converse and study together, dating in this rural area is forbidden, and girls worry about their reputations if they should talk too much or freely to male classmates – and their brothers watch them too, to protect the reputation of the whole family. Males are not subject to the same scrutiny, and indeed some boasted about sexual conquests of girls. In spite of strict rules and mores about sexual interactions, youth often, but not always, find a way around them. This was evident from the reactions of two brand new brides whom I asked a local assistant to interview. (Given the delicacy of the topic, I felt the brides would be more comfortable with a local young woman they knew rather than me, a foreigner). Given the taboo on close interaction of the sexes, I expected that the wedding night could be very stressful for a young woman with no previous experience. This was the case for the older bride, who was very upset the next morning. However, a younger bride was quite relaxed, and the research assistant said she had been seen walking out in the fields (a potentially private space) with her fiancée before the wedding.<sup>25</sup>

One source for youth to learn about “forbidden” heterosexual relationships is the media. In the early 1980s, we found that “Moroccan television portrays both eastern and western couples in romantic relationships, and movies and videos often contain more risqué images; the latter two are seen more by males. Popular music is listened to in several languages, and nearly all laments a lost love or celebrates a new one.”<sup>26</sup> Another source for girls is that adult women may talk about the marital and/or sexual problems of others (not their own), when teenage girls are present, helping with household chores. They are very quiet, hoping not to draw attention to themselves and be banished – but to hear as much as possible.

One way youth did *not* learn about sexual matters, or physiological development, was direct conversations with their parents; youth rather talked to friends and sometimes older siblings. Virtually no girls had been formally

---

24. Davis and Davis, “Sexual Values in a Moroccan Town,” 227.

25. Davis and Davis, *Adolescence in a Moroccan Town*, 130.

26. Susan S. Davis and Douglas A. Davis, “The Mosque and the Satellite: Media and Adolescence in a Moroccan Town,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 24 (1995): 590.

told about menstruation by their mothers, and some were quite frightened when theirs began. However, many had covertly observed the monthly preparations of their mothers and sisters, and also knew that one doesn't fast during one's period in Ramadan.

Given that girls go out more now, both to school and to shop for their parents, there are more opportunities for the sexes to get together than in the past, when girls and women had little reason to leave the house. At that time, seeing a girl out made people wonder, providing a form of social control. Now seeing them is ordinary, so that type of social control is less effective. While the sexes getting together is still generally disapproved, it does happen. I wondered if there might be a "sexual revolution" in this small town, from no such interaction to a certain level. However, when I asked about past behavior, there were indeed cases in past generations, so there was no revolution, just an increase in frequency.<sup>27</sup>

As the behavior of unmarried youth meeting with the opposite sex is increasing, some norms governing this are also changing. In the early 1980s, there was a marriage crisis in Morocco, in which young men who could not afford to marry in the global recession of the 1970s skipped a generation when they did marry. That left many women single, and they and their parents were eager for marriage. It was observed that girls who followed norms and rarely went out got married less often than others who did go out and were seen, so the norm of keeping girls home and separate decreased for many.<sup>28</sup>

While both sexes hope for warm relationships and love in marriage,<sup>29</sup> the effects of increased heterosexual interaction before marriage are very ambivalent. Males often cannot respect the girls they are involved with, and girls fear betrayal by boys who often claim strong feelings, and then leave them. One young woman explained

"There's a boy – you trust him and he trusts you. He tells you "I care for you. If I don't see you, I'll go crazy (...)." And at that time the boy has feelings. He cares for you. Truly (...). But he doesn't have any money, and you just keep sacrificing yourself for him, talking to him, laughing with him (...).

And finally he doesn't marry you – how do you feel? It feels like a calamity (...). Since you sacrificed yourself for that boy, *even* in public

---

27. Susan Davis, "Changing Gender Relations in a Moroccan Town," in *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, ed. Judith Tucker (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1993), 210.

28. Davis, "Changing Gender Relations in a Moroccan Town," 216-17; 220-21.

29. Davis, D. and S. Davis, "The Mosque and the Satellite," 237.

you talked to him (...) and in the end he marries someone else (...). That a boy gives you his word of honor and later doesn't keep it is not right. That is what doesn't allow the girl who's become mature and responsible to trust a boy. She doesn't trust boys – never.”<sup>30</sup>

Supporting this, when my husband and I compared the data we gathered from youth on male-female interactions, most of that from males was about sexual behavior and that from females about relationships.<sup>31</sup>

In some parts of the MENA region there are honor killings of girls who transgress rules, and while I had never heard convincing stories of it in the village, I did ask. While there were examples of single young women who got pregnant, none were killed. The worst penalty was one girl who was locked in her room during the pregnancy; in a less severe case a girl was banished by her family after giving birth – for five days, after which she came home. One does hear some stories about lethal punishments, but I could confirm none; I think they serve to frighten girls into behaving. The only casualty I heard of was of a male: a married woman had a male visitor one night who climbed into a tree in his white robe when the husband came home unexpectedly – and was shot.

An interesting aspect of youth was homoerotic play for males, especially young teens, who had no access to girls. Older boys might contact prostitutes, or attempt to seduce girls, but younger boys sometimes had sexual experiences with each other. A contrast with much American experience was that these boys did not see themselves as homosexual because of a few experiences, but as just passing through a life phase.<sup>32</sup> Adult homosexuality is strongly sanctioned in Moroccan society, yet, as everywhere, it does exist. There was one older young man in a study sample family, and people said, “[h]is poor mother can't get into arguments with other women, or his behaviour gets thrown in her face.” Yet he appeared in the town with his lips tinted and a heavy gold neck chain, neither ever worn by other local males. Later he married, perhaps giving in to social pressures, or perhaps still a bisexual lifestyle.

Psychologically, adolescence in Morocco involves developing *'āqel*, literally mind but meaning responsible, mature behavior. When this is accomplished, it's a sign of the end of adolescence. People said girls did this sooner than boys, often in the late teens and boys in their late twenties or

---

30. Davis, “Changing Gender Relations in a Moroccan Town,” 219.

31. *Ibid.*, 220.

32. Davis and Davis, *Adolescence in a Moroccan Town*, 111-3.

later. The opposite of *'āqel* is *taysh* or impulsive, irresponsible behavior, and people noted some but not all youth have this, especially males. Many males experiment with drinking, smoking, clandestinely eating during Ramadan and going to prostitutes during this period, but usually give most up – except smoking – as adults. For those with more interest in psychological development, Gary Gregg's *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology* provides an excellent overview of psychological research in the Middle East in English, French and Arabic involving all ages.<sup>33</sup> His chapter on adolescence ends with a list and summary of sources, including some which I found very useful, like *Au-delà de toute pudeur*.<sup>34</sup>

### Artisans

My work helping women sell their rugs online led to my writing about them, their work, and their products in *Women Artisans of Morocco: Their Stories, Their Lives*.<sup>35</sup> This also was not a taboo topic; anthropologists often write about the material objects in various cultures. However similar work is rare because few combine the focus on both the people and their products in the way I do, nor provide the lavish photo illustrations. In Morocco, during the colonial period Prosper Ricard wrote four volumes extensively documenting Moroccan Carpets.<sup>36</sup> A recent article discusses his work, and that of others on Morocco, who de Pommereau says invent various names for rugs, saying “[t] his literature for tourists is thus inventing a body of ethnographic knowledge. And in so doing it is filling a void, as there are *virtually no ethnographic studies of Moroccan rugs*... Ricard himself acknowledged inconsistencies in information gleaned from merchants or Intelligence officers and admitted that his *Corpus des tapis marocains* was more a handbook for weavers than a mass of information that would help in understanding the history of a popular practice.[emphasis added].”<sup>37</sup> My work is a step in creating this ethnography.

In this case funding the work was not a problem: I was invited to do the book, a real luxury. Linda Ligon, editor of Thrums Books, produces a series with a focus on textile artisans and their work in various cultures, and invited me to do one on Morocco. I interviewed nearly thirty women, most

33. Gary Gregg, *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

34. Soumia Naamane-Guessous, *Au-delà de toute pudeur: La sexualité féminine au Maroc* (Casablanca: Éditions Eddif, 1991).

35. Susan S. Davis, *Women Artisans of Morocco: Their Stories, Their Lives* (Loveland, Colorado, Thrums Books, 2018).

36. Prosper Ricard, *Corpus des tapis marocains*, 4 vols (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1924).

37. Alain de Pommereau, “The Invention of the Moroccan Carpet,” in *After Orientalism: Critical Perspectives on Western Agency and Eastern Re-Appropriations*, eds. François Pouillon and Jean-Claude Vatin (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 133.

of whom were weavers I had known for years. Represented as well, are a seamstress, Fes embroiderers, bead makers and two middle women who sell the products. They vary in age, education, and location in Morocco. Since I like to use women's own words, not my memory of them, I taped, translated, and transcribed the interviews.

While the topic of the book is not taboo, I am concerned that anthropologist colleagues (and others) may view it as a "coffee table book" because of all the illustrations and dismiss it as anthropology. However, I feel it contains much valuable ethnographic information, both about women's craft and their lives. A few examples will illustrate.

Mama Ilahiane is an older woman who has not been to school, and a traditional weaver of the Ait Atta tribe living near an oasis in southeastern Morocco. She was a wealth of information on traditional weaving, both the practical and spiritual aspects.

She loves weaving; it's the main focus of her life:

"Weaving gets into your blood and keeps you busy. I'm always working on some design. I have to finish it, so see how it will come out, and then try another one. I don't want to leave it, and the happiness it gives me doesn't leave me either. I get up in the morning, pray, and then I go right to work." Her younger sister aptly jokes "It's the Internet of the old days."<sup>38</sup>

She describes the customs for making a little girl's first cape: "You don't buy wool or use your own supply. You tell people you're making one and say, 'Give me what wool you can,' and each person will give you a little wool. It's so God will make things easy for her. She'll wear it and be protected from rain, she'll receive sustenance from God." The same process is followed for a little boy's first *jellaba*.<sup>39</sup>

There are spiritual aspects to finishing a rug:

"We sprinkle water on the warp board, repeat the first verse of the Quran, and say 'I gave you water to drink in this world, give me water in the other one when I die' God knows if it's true.

Then we sprinkle salt on a mirror and cut the rug off. We use salt so the rug will be 'salty' or lively, and the mirror so it will be pretty. When we cut it off, the soul leaves. From the loom it has died. And the soul of

---

38. Davis, *Women Artisans of Morocco*, 102.

39. *Ibid.*, 101-2.

the rug is born into your house. It's like the birth of a lamb. Someone may come by and say "Congratulations."<sup>40</sup>

Another weaver, Fadma Buhassi, lives in southwestern Morocco, also in a rural area. She is the mother of nine, a midwife, a village women's leader, and a master weaver. When her husband's employer didn't pay him for a year, the family lived on her weaving income.

While foreign clients often want rugs using natural dyes, they are rarely used in Morocco now. Fadma explains why:

"If you need a little bit of dye, you can gather a few flowers and plants and do it. But if you're making a large carpet, you need a lot of plants and flowers, and it takes a long time to gather them from the fields and woods, and to get them ready for dyeing. And you need to be sure it will come out a great color. If it's not the right color you have to try again and again until you get the color you want. That's why it's very difficult to use natural dyes."<sup>41</sup>

I asked women if they set the prices on their rugs, and if so, what did they consider. Fadma sets her own prices, explaining clearly, and gives us insight into how weavers think about their sales:

"I look at the size, the design, the color, and if it's beautiful or not. I think about how hard the work was. I figure out the cost of the wool, the dye, and the wood used to heat the dye. I set a price so that if it's cut I'll still be happy. When you don't get enough money for all your materials, it's like you failed. If I really need the money, sometimes I still sell. But if I don't get enough to cover my expenses and my time, I feel hurt. The work is very hard and you deserve to be paid for it. They shouldn't cheat you. It's beautiful to watch the rug as you weave, but if you start from preparing the wool, then dyeing, washing, spinning and weaving, it's very hard."<sup>42</sup>

The book provides information about the lives and work of many other women, including: an older weaver on the edge of the desert who herded camels as a girl but now sees her grandchildren using cell phones; a group of disabled women in Marrakech who have embroidered together for over twenty years and have a great esprit de corps; a high school-educated young woman from the Middle Atlas who is helping put her village weaving cooperative

---

40. Ibid., 106-7.

41. Ibid., 61.

42. Davis, *Women Artisans of Morocco*, 62.



online; and a seamstress who is also a teacher and met her husband on the Internet.

I hope that anthropologists will see the value in the book as reflected in one of the jacket comments “A unique achievement, (the book) is at once richly ethnographic, deeply informative, and aesthetically vibrant; it will be of lasting historic value.”<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

I feel incredibly fortunate to have been involved with these aspects of the anthropology of Morocco over the last fifty years, to see the growth and richness of scholarship on gender, and to be a colleague of many of the practitioners, native and foreign. Research on adolescence and artisans opened areas new to me, and quite new to North Africa, given the limited literature that existed. I hope to continue this fascinating involvement, perhaps finding more new areas to explore.

### Bibliography

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Ammar, Hamed. *Growing Up in an Egyptian Village*. Oxon, England: Routledge, 1954.
- Bordat, Stephanie Willman, Susan S. Davis and Saida Kouzzi. “Women as Agents of Grassroots Change: Illustrating Micro-Empowerment in Morocco.” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 7, 1 (2011): 90-119.
- Burbank, Victoria Katherine. *Aboriginal Adolescence*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988.
- Condon, Richard G. *Inuit Youth: Growth and Change in the Canadian Arctic*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987.
- Davis, Susan S. “Zahrah Muhammad, A Rural Woman of Morocco.” In *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, eds. Elizabeth Fernea and Basima Bezirgan, 201-17. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Patience and Power: Women’s Lives in a Moroccan Village*. Rochester, VT: Schenkman, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Changing Gender Relations in a Moroccan Town.” In *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, ed. Judith Tucker, 208-23. Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Women Weavers OnLine: Rural Moroccan Women on the Internet.” In *Gender and the Digital Economy: Perspectives from the Developing World*, eds. Cecelia Ng and Swasti Mitter. New Delhi, London: Sage Publications, 2005.
- Davis, Susan S. and Douglas A. Davis. *Adolescence in a Moroccan Town*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “The Mosque and the Satellite: Media and Adolescence in a Moroccan Town.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 24 (1995): 577-93.

---

43. From a jacket comment on my book Davis, *Women Artisans of Morocco*.

- Davis, Douglas A. and Susan S. Davis. "Sexual Values in a Moroccan Town." In *Psychology and Culture*, eds. Walter J. Lonner and Roy S. Malpass, 225-30. Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Possessed by Love: Gender and Romance in Morocco." In *Romantic Passion: A Universal Experience?*, ed. W. Jankowiak, 219-38. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- de Pommereau, Alain. "The Invention of the Moroccan Carpet." In *After Orientalism: Critical Perspectives on Western Agency and Eastern Re-Appropriations*, eds. François Pouillion and Jean-Claude Vatin, 221-35. Leiden: Brill, 2015.
- Goichon, A. M. *La vie féminine au Mzab: Étude de sociologie musulmane*. Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1927.
- Granqvist, Hilma. *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village*, vol. 1. Helsingfors: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1931.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village*, vol. 2. Helsingfors: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1935.
- Gregg, Gary. *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hollos, Marida and Philip E. Leis. *Becoming Nigerian in Ijo Society*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989.
- Naamane-Guessous, Soumia. *Au-delà de toute pudeur: La sexualité féminine au Maroc*. Casablanca: Éditions Eddif, 1991.
- Mead, Margaret. *Coming of Age in Samoa*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1928.
- Meriwether, Margaret L. and Judith E. Tucker, eds. *A Social History of Women and Gender in The Modern Middle East*. New York: Perseus, 1999.
- Mernissi, Fatema. *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1975.
- Ricard, Prosper. *Corpus des tapis marocains*, 4 vols. Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1924.
- Waterbury, John. *The Commander of the Faithful: The Moroccan Political Elite – A Study in Segmented Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.
- Whiting, Beatrice, ed. *Six Cultures: Studies of Child Rearing*. Hoboken NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 1963.
- Whiting, Beatrice and John Whiting with Richard Longabaugh. *Children of Six Cultures: A Psycho-Cultural Analysis*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1974.
- Women Weavers OnLine. Accessed March 18, 2020. <http://www.marrakeshexpress.org/weaversoverview.html>.

### مواضيع دراستها في عداد المحرمات؟ النساء والمراهقين والحرفيين

ملخص: تبدو دراسة مثل هذه المواضيع في زمننا الراهن أمراً عادياً وبعيداً عن الطابوهات، لكنني عندما حاولت إجراء بحث في موضوع المرأة المغربية القروية في أواخر الستينيات، قيل لي إن التمويل لن يُمنح؛ ويبدو أن الدراسات الجندرية لم تكن تشكل وقتئذ موضوعاً جاداً. وهكذا حصلت على منحة للبحث في موضوع آخر، وبمجرد وصولي إلى المغرب شعرت بأنني مضطرة لمتابعة دراسة النوع الاجتماعي والبحث في قضاياها. لكن عند عودتي إلى الولايات المتحدة، طلبت مني الجهة المحتضنة أن أعيد لها المنحة! ولحسن الحظ، دعمني أستاذي المشرف، فتحول بحثي إلى إنتاج كتاب مبكر عن المرأة في المغرب. وكان المراهقون والحرفيون من الموضوعات الأقل "إثارة للجدل"، ولكن كان هناك بحث محدود في كلا المجالين. وتضمنت النتائج المتعلقة بالمراهقين المغاربة اختلافات كبيرة بين الجنسين في السلوك المعياري والممارسات الجنسية وتغيير العلاقات بين الجنسين. وكان العمل السابق على الحرفيين يتعلق بالمنتجات، وليس المنتجين، ويتضمن العمل

كليهما في الوقت ذاته. ويقدم البحث نظرة ثاقبة حول مشاعر النساجين تجاه تحديد أثمان الزرابي وتسعيرها، أو استخدام الأصباغ الطبيعية، أو لماذا وكيف يمكن للمرأة أن تؤسس جمعية تعاونية لصنع أزرار الجلاب (المعروفة بمفردة العقاد الدارجة). وتظهر هذه المقالة أيضا مدى الصعوبات التي واجهتها في التعامل مع هذه الموضوعات، والنتائج المهمة التي تم تحقيقها من خلال القدرة على القيام بتلك المقاربة البحثية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجنس، المرأة، التمكين، المراهقة، الجنسانية، الحرفيون، النسيج.

### Sujets tabous? Femmes, adolescents et artisans

**Résumé:** Bien que ces sujets soient loin d'être tabous aujourd'hui, lorsque j'ai essayé pour la première fois de faire des recherches sur les femmes rurales marocaines à la fin des années 1960, on m'a dit que le financement ne serait pas accordé; apparemment, le genre n'était pas un sujet sérieux. Après avoir bénéficié d'une bourse pour un autre sujet, une fois au Maroc, je me suis senti obligé de mon travail sur le genre. Mais à mon retour aux États-Unis, l'organisme subventionnaire m'a demandé de leur restituer leur bourse! Heureusement, mon superviseur m'avait soutenu et mes recherches ont abouti à la production d'un des premiers livres sur les femmes au Maroc. Les adolescents et les artisans étaient des sujets moins "controversés," mais des recherches limitées existaient sur les deux domaines. Les résultats sur les adolescents marocains comprenaient de grandes différences entre les sexes dans le comportement normatif, les pratiques sexuelles et l'évolution des relations entre les sexes. Le travail comprend les deux à la fois. Il donne un aperçu de ce que pensent les tisserands de la tarification des tapis ou de l'utilisation de colorants naturels, ou pourquoi et comment les femmes pourraient former une coopérative pour fabriquer des boutons de jellaba. Cet article décrit les difficultés rencontrées dans le traitement de ces sujets, ainsi que les résultats obtenus par la possibilité de mener à bien cette démarche de recherche.

**Mots-clés:** Genre, femmes, autonomisation, adolescence, sexualité, artisans, tissage.