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“Gender Instrumentalization and Feminist Resistence: the pathway of Algerian Women”

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Abstract

This thesis examines the evolution of women's political and social agency in Algeria through the lens of gender instrumentalization. It explores how state and non-state actors have deployed gender as a political tool across key historical moments—from colonial rule, through the War of Independence, post-independence state formation, the 1984 Family Code, the 1990s Civil War, and up to contemporary movements such as Hirak. The central research question guiding this study is: *How has the instrumentalization of gender shaped the political and social agency of Algerian women, and how have they resisted it?* The thesis adopts a case study approach, reconstructing women's mobilization, strategies, and forms of resistance over time. A dedicated chapter provides the theoretical framework, drawing on postcolonial and feminist theories to contextualize the structural, social, and cultural factors that shape women's agency. Subsequent chapters trace the historical trajectory of Algerian women—from early feminist associations under colonialism, through armed and civic engagement in the War of Independence, the challenges of post-independence legislation, the violent disruptions of the 1990s, and contemporary forms of civic and digital activism. A thematic reflection section gathers cross-cutting issues emerging from these historical moments, emphasizing how persistent resistance and creative strategies allowed Algerian women to assert agency, maintain visibility, and challenge societal and political pressures—even when these efforts did not translate into substantial legal or political gains.

By reconstructing these trajectories, the thesis argues that women's political agency has been forged through persistent resistance, demonstrating how feminist actors navigated and countered the pressures of gender instrumentalization. The study aims to underscore the importance of approaching political and social phenomena from a gendered perspective, highlighting how such an analytical lens can reveal dynamics of power, participation, and social transformation that might otherwise remain overlooked.

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Introduction

Algerian women have repeatedly been positioned at the very center of the nation's moral imagination—invoked as symbols of authenticity, modernity, honor, sacrifice, and collective belonging—while being persistently kept at the margins of the institutional arenas where sovereignty, citizenship, and enforceable rights are produced. This thesis begins from that tension. It treats it not as a contradiction generated by "tradition" or by the contingencies of particular regimes, but as a historically durable political logic: the instrumentalization of gender. Across Algeria's modern trajectory, women's bodies, roles, and "rights" have been strategically mobilized by a plurality of actors—colonial authorities, nationalist movements, post-independence state elites, religious authorities, and political challengers—to legitimize broader ideological projects and to police the boundaries of the political community. Yet this same history also reveals something equally consistent: women have never been reducible to the roles assigned to them. Even when gender became a stake in struggles not of their choosing, women organized, negotiated, contested, and reappeared—sometimes in overtly political forms, sometimes through less visible repertoires rooted in care, survival, and collective infrastructure.

The guiding question of the thesis is therefore deliberately twofold: how has the instrumentalization of gender shaped Algerian women's political and social agency, and how have women resisted it? This framing matters because it avoids the two interpretive traps that often dominate gendered accounts of conflict and state-building: portraying women as merely passive victims of patriarchal violence, or, conversely, celebrating women's participation as exceptional heroism detached from the structures that constrained it. Instead, the thesis approaches agency as historically situated practice—one that can take the form of participation in liberation struggles, association-building, coalition-making, legal contestation, documentation, mutual aid, and narrative battles over who is entitled to speak for the nation. It also recognizes that agency frequently survives by moving: when direct confrontation becomes too costly, resistance is displaced into semi-visible spaces, reorganized through new identities and alliances, and carried forward through forms of action that do not always look like formal politics but often sustain it. Central to this analysis is a specific understanding of gender instrumentalization. Here, gender is not treated as a fixed identity category, but

as a political resource—mobilized, negotiated, and, at times, weaponized through legal frameworks, nationalist discourse, religious authority, colonial governance, security logics, media narratives, and international norms. Instrumentalization, in this sense, is not limited to moments of explicit repression. It also operates through selective and staged invocations of women's "emancipation," when the rhetoric of liberation is used to legitimize projects that remain structurally unaccountable to women themselves. Gender becomes a language through which power announces itself—whether in the name of civilization, revolution, stability, or morality—and women are repeatedly turned into the proof, the boundary, or the battleground of political legitimacy. This has direct consequences for the thesis' core analytical concern: the shaping of women's "space." Space is understood here in a broad, political sense. It is physical—streets, workplaces, schools, and public visibility—but also deeply legal and symbolic: the family as an institution of governance; citizenship as an enforceable membership rather than a rhetorical promise; morality as a technology of boundary-making; and the right to speak as a struggle over recognition and narratability. Algeria offers an especially intense historical sequence in which women's space is repeatedly opened during moments of crisis—war, political rupture, mass mobilization—only to be narrowed again through post-crisis stabilization, legal codification, and renewed projects of "authenticity." This cyclical dynamic reveals how participation can be simultaneously enabled and contained: women's presence becomes politically necessary at key historical thresholds, yet the institutional conversion of that presence into durable rights is persistently resisted.

For this reason, Algeria constitutes a paradigmatic case through which to examine gender as a stake in political struggle. The country's modern history unfolds through successive ruptures—colonial rule, violent decolonization, post-independence state formation, Islamist contestation, civil conflict, and mass protest—each of which makes gender politics unusually visible. Across these thresholds, "the Algerian woman" repeatedly becomes a privileged idiom through which political projects justify themselves, define enemies, and stage moral order, while women's lived agency is simultaneously constrained and periodically reconfigured. To make sense of these recurring openings and closures, the thesis also draws on the concept of liminality: moments of war, regime crisis, and mass mobilization disrupt established classifications

(public/private, civic/military, secular/religious), creating new roles and possibilities—yet they also intensify attempts to "fix" gender meanings through discipline, backlash, and renewed boundary enforcement. Liminality helps explain why women may gain visibility and political presence during upheavals while remaining exposed to mechanisms that later translate participation into containment.

Methodologically, the thesis adopts a historically grounded case study approach, tracing women's mobilization and organization across key periods and examining how gender operates as a tool of rule and contestation. Agency is not equated with formal rights, representation, or leadership positions alone. Instead, the analysis follows how agency emerges through collective organization, tactical adaptation, narrative contestation, and the strategic use of identities—whether as veterans and heirs of the liberation struggle, as mothers and caregivers, as students and workers, as "respectable" citizens navigating moral gatekeeping, or as feminist collectives producing autonomous political language. Particular attention is devoted to what can be described as counter-instrumentalization: the ways women have tactically redeployed gendered symbols and claims—sometimes the very idioms used to contain them—to expand political visibility, claim rights, and construct solidarities that outlast single political moments.

The thesis is organized accordingly. Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical framework, defining gender instrumentalization and mapping the actors and mechanisms through which it operates, while situating the Algerian case within broader debates on postcolonial feminism, colonial feminism/Orientalism, gender regimes, and bargaining with patriarchy. Chapter 2 examines the colonial era and the War of Independence, showing how women became a strategic site of colonial "civilization" projects and nationalist authenticity, and how wartime participation expanded women's roles while exposing them to postwar narrative containment and institutional silencing. Chapter 3 follows the post-independence period and the political trajectory culminating in the 1984 Family Code, treated as a consolidating moment of a neopatriarchal gender regime: women's symbolic centrality as heirs of liberation coexisted with legal subordination embedded in family governance, producing a durable contradiction between emancipatory rhetoric and constrained citizenship. Chapter 4 addresses the political opening after 1989 and the eruption of the Black Decade, when gender

instrumentalization reached an extreme form through moral policing and gendered terror, even as women's organizations expanded protest, documentation, care infrastructures, and transnational advocacy—demonstrating how resistance operates under conditions designed to extinguish it. The final sections turn to more recent mobilization, including the Hirak, drawing cross-cutting reflections on continuity and change: the heightened visibility of women, persistent gatekeeping (often condensed into the refrain "not the time"), and the enduring struggle to translate participation into enforceable citizenship and structural transformation.

Across these chapters, the thesis advances a single core claim: gender instrumentalization has continuously shaped Algerian women's space and agency by turning women into symbols and stakes of political struggle—yet women have persistently resisted this reduction, organizing themselves, building coalitions, and inventing repertoires of action that survive even when legal or institutional gains remain limited. The payoff of this argument is not only historical. Reading Algerian politics through a gendered lens clarifies how power operates through the regulation of bodies, morality, and family law, and how collective action is shaped—often paradoxically—by the very mechanisms that attempt to contain it.

Chapter 1 – Theoretical Framework and introduction of the Case Study

1.1 Gender instrumentalization: towards a working definition

1.1.1 Gender as a social construction

This thesis takes as a starting point the idea that gender is not simply a social category or an identity, but a political resource that can be mobilised, negotiated and weaponised by a variety of actors. As Judith Butler pointed out in her book *Gender Trouble* :

"*Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender."(Butler, 1990, pg.45)*

From Butler's words it is possible to understand three crucial points. First, gender should be understood as an effect rather than an essence. It is not a pre-social, natural attribute anchored in biology, but the outcome of repeated, socially meaningful practices – modes of dress, bodily comportment, speech, affect and relational behaviour – that are iterated over time (ibidem). Through repetition, these practices "congeal" and produce the illusion of a stable, coherent and naturalised gender identity. Second, these reiterative practices do not take place in a neutral space but are organised and constrained within "rigid regulatory frames" (ibidem). Gender is performed under the constant pressure of institutional, legal, familial, religious and cultural norms that prescribe what counts as intelligible masculinity and femininity and sanction deviations (ibidem). In this sense, gender is inseparable from relations of power: those who shape and enforce these regulatory frames are able to use gender norms strategically, to secure social order, legitimize authority or marginalize dissenting subjects. Following this line of reasoning, conflict theory can help to conceptualise society as a battlefield in which men and women compete for scarce resources – work, knowledge, prestige, institutional positions – and in which power is unequally distributed and contested (Harding, 1986;

de Lauretis, 1984). From this perspective, struggles around "women's status" are never merely symbolic or cultural; they are a tug of war for access and control of material and symbolic resources, and therefore over the capacity to shape institutions and collective futures. This implies that despite their instrumentalization, women are far from being mere passive subjects.

1.1.2 Actors and mechanisms

Within this framework, it becomes crucial to specify which actors are in a position to instrumentalise gender, and through what mechanisms. Drawing on Moghadam's adaptation of Walby's theory of gender regimes, we can think of a set of structured arenas – polity, economy, civil society, violence and, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regional context, the family – within which different actors mobilise and instrumentalise gender (Moghadam, 2020, pp. 703-724). In much of the region, authoritarian states operating within rentier or semi-rentier economies have used gender policy as part of a broader "authoritarian bargain", offering education, public sector employment and certain forms of social protection in exchange for political acquiescence, while retaining conservative family laws that secure women's dependence on male kin (Ibidem). Public gender regimes thus take either a neopatriarchal form – characterised by the persistence of domestic patriarchy, limits on women's economic participation, tight constraints on civil society and weak legislation on violence against women – or a conservative-corporatist form, most visible in the Maghreb, where reformed family law, greater female presence in the professions and increased women's political representation coexist with the centrality of the family as the locus of female control (Ibidem). Within this configuration, the state and religious authorities act as key regulators of gender relations through law and policy, but they are not the only relevant actors.

A second set of actors comprises colonial powers, nationalist movements and armed groups, which frequently mobilise gender to define the boundaries of the political community. Colonial administrations have historically invoked the oppression of indigenous women as evidence of the "backwardness" of colonised societies, thereby legitimising their own civilising mission (Spivak, 1988, pp. 271–313; Mohanty, 1984,

pp. 333–358). Nationalist movements in turn often present women as biological reproducers of the nation, bearers of culture and symbols of collective honour (Yuval-Davis, 1997, pp.23). As Cynthia Enloe notes, militarised and nationalist projects rely heavily on idealised images of women – as grieving mothers, heroic combatants or modest guardians of tradition – to legitimise war and sacrifice (Enloe, 1990, pp.42-66). As will be further explained , in colonial Algeria French authorities and the FLN both treated women's bodies, and particularly the veil, as strategic instruments in psychological warfare, each claiming to "liberate" or "protect" Algerian women in order to advance their own political aims (Fanon, 1965, pp. 35-63; MacMaster, 2009; Lazreg, 2018).

A third crucial actor is the religious authority, which includes official clerical institutions, local religious leaders, religious movements and transnational religious networks. As a number of scholars have shown, control over the interpretation of religious texts and norms is a major source of power in many societies, and gender is often a central terrain of this interpretive struggle (Ahmed, 1992, pp.151–155; Mernissi, 1991). By promoting particular visions of modesty, family relations, inheritance or guardianship, religious actors can reinforce or challenge state policies and social hierarchies. At the same time, the religious field is not monolithic: as will be further explored , Islamic feminist thinkers and activists mobilise the very same religious sources to argue for equality and justice, turning scriptural interpretation itself into a site of contestation rather than a fixed constraint.

Alongside states and religious institutions, international organisations and transnational NGOs have become increasingly important actors in the gender field. Through conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) and platforms like the Beijing Declaration, international bodies set normative frameworks for "women's rights" that states are encouraged, or pressured, to adopt. Governments may ratify international treaties or create state gender machineries partly to access funding, signal modernity or improve their international reputation, without necessarily altering entrenched power relations (Htun and Weldon, 2010, pp. 207–216). In these contexts, gender equality discourse can be double-edged:

it provides tools that local feminist movements can seize upon, but it can also be instrumentalised by states to perform compliance while limiting genuine transformation.

The media, cultural industries and digital platforms are another set of actors that participate in gender instrumentalization. As de Lauretis argues, gender is produced and reproduced through "technologies of gender" – systems of representation that include cinema, literature and popular culture, and that shape the ways in which femininity and masculinity are imagined and lived (de Lauretis, 1987, pp.3). In contemporary contexts, social media and digital activism have opened new spaces in which gendered images and narratives are circulated, contested and appropriated by different actors. Authoritarian regimes, religious movements and feminist activists all use visual and digital repertoires – from images of veiled or unveiled women, to hashtags and online campaigns – to define what counts as respectable, patriotic, pious or rebellious femininity.

Finally, it is important to recognise that feminist and women's movements themselves also mobilise gender strategically. They may foreground certain identities (e.g. "mothers of the disappeared", "moudjahidat", "students", "working women") to gain visibility, build alliances or claim moral authority in the public sphere. In some contexts, parts of the women's movement are incorporated into state structures, giving rise to what the literature calls state feminism, where government agencies or quasi-autonomous councils claim to speak for women while being embedded in state priorities (White, 2003, pp. 145–59). This could be identified as counter-instrumentalization: feminist actors, too, deploy gendered symbols and narratives tactically, but with the explicit aim of expanding women's rights and agency rather than subordinating them to other projects. Moghadam's analysis underscores that the strength and organisational capacity of feminist movements are decisive for shifting public gender regimes: where women's organisations, professional associations and feminist coalitions have been able to build alliances with political parties and draw on international norms, they have succeeded in pushing authoritarian and neopatriarchal states towards more conservative-corporatist arrangements, thereby partially re-signifying the very discourses and institutions through which gender had been instrumentalised (Moghadam, 2020, pp.703-724).

In sum, gender instrumentalization cannot be ascribed to a single actor or institutional domain. Rather, it should be understood as a relational field of practice in which states, colonial and nationalist elites, religious authorities, international organisations, media producers and political movements mobilise gendered norms, symbols and institutional arrangements in pursuit of diverse political, ideological and geopolitical projects.

Therefore, the term gender instrumentalization denotes the strategic deployment of gender norms, images and policies by a plurality of actors to advance other broader political, ideological or geopolitical projects. This occurs every time the "woman question" is invoked, for instance, to legitimize colonial rule, to consolidate postcolonial regimes, to mobilise nationalist sentiments or to discipline dissent. The content of the gender discourse can be emancipatory or conservative, but in both cases women's bodies, rights and roles become a terrain on which other battles are waged.

1.2 Historical patterns: gender as a political weapon

1.2.1 Gender instrumentalization through history

Gender instrumentalization is not a new phenomenon, nor is it limited to any particular culture or type of state. The female form has frequently functioned as a symbolic location for the articulation and contestation of larger political objectives throughout history. Because strong mothers were thought to be essential to producing strong male warriors for the polis, Spartan women's upbringing and relative freedom of movement were justified in Ancient Greece; their bodies and reproductive capacities were thus subordinated to a militarized ideal of citizenship (Pomeroy, 2002). Witch hunts in early modern Europe also show how female bodies could be framed as the site of moral and spiritual danger: accusations of witchcraft disproportionately targeted women whose knowledge, age, behavior, or poverty put them at the periphery of community norms, transforming the "witch" into a tool for enforcing sexuality, religious conformity, and social order (Federici, 2004). During the French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges' *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* challenged the exclusion of women from the universalist language of rights and was met with brutal repression: her

execution in 1793 symbolised the refusal of revolutionary elites to accept women as political subjects equal to men (de Gouges, 1791; Scott, 1996). Here, the radical promise of citizenship was explicitly gendered, and women's demands were cast as a threat to the cohesion of the new order. Later, to support racial and demographic objectives, nationalist and fascist parties created idealized images of femininity, such as the German Mutter der Nation, which mobilized women's domestic and reproductive functions for the benefit of the country (Koonz, 1987; Yuval-Davis, 1997, pp.23). Sara Farris refers to this pattern as "femonationalism"(Farris, 2017, pp.1-17). In modern liberal democracies, discourses about women's rights have been used to legitimize security agendas and military interventions, such as when the "war on terror" was framed as an effort to save Afghan women (Abu-Lughod, 2002; 2013), or to defend anti-immigration and Islamophobic policies in the name of gender equality.Taken together, these episodes point to a persistent historical pattern: women's bodies, rights and social roles are repeatedly invested with meanings that exceed their own claims and experiences,whether in the name of liberation, protection, morality or authenticity, gender becomes a privileged site for performing power, policing boundaries and legitimising projects that may or may not correspond to women's own interests.

1.2.2 The Colonial Dimension: Postcolonial perspectives

The historical pattern sketched above acquires a specific configuration under colonial rule. In imperial contexts, the instrumentalization of gender is articulated not only through hierarchies between men and women, but also through relations of race, civilisation and political subordination. For instance, the Raj portrayed itself as the harbinger of enlightenment and humanitarianism in British India, where the colonial state's campaign against sati became a privileged platform. The endangered widow was used as proof of the indigenous people's "backwardness" and as a rationale for the civilizing mission (Spivak, 1988, pp. 96-101). Even though these policies were designed to maintain racial hierarchies and imperial control, imperial administrators were able to portray certain reforms as gifts of modernity in other British and French colonies through discussions about women's mobility, marriage, schooling, and monogamy (McClintock, 1995, pp. 6, 31, 253–255). In such cases, women are more than just one group among those impacted by empire; their bodies, rights, and social positions serve as crucial markers that help to explain and normalize the distinction between colonizers

and colonized. Understanding gender instrumentalization in colonial and postcolonial contexts requires an understanding of postcolonial feminist ideas, which conceptualize women in formerly colonized cultures as situated at the junction of numerous, overlapping regimes of dominance. The concept of "double colonization," as defined by Petersen and Rutherford, encapsulates how colonized women are simultaneously subjected to the power of European imperialism and the patriarchal authority of colonized men, who frequently mobilize female figures in nationalist narratives without challenging women's structural subordination, as Ritu Tyagi recalls in her article *Understanding Postcolonial Feminism in relation with Postcolonial and Feminist Theories* (2014). While women's political agency and bodily autonomy are strictly regulated, they are hailed as allegories of the land or as symbols of the pure, pre-colonial nation in many anti-colonial movements. As a result, "nationalism" becomes another tool for controlling female bodies rater than challenging patriarchal hierarchies (Tyagi, 2014, pp.45–50 ; McClintock, 1995). Postcolonial feminists further argue that this double oppression is compounded by Western feminist discourses which, in seeking to “give voice” to Third World women, frequently erase racial, cultural and historical specificities and impose Eurocentric models of emancipation. As Tyagi shows, drawing on critiques by Spivak, Mohanty and Black feminists, hegemonic Western feminism has often produced the “Third World woman” as a homogeneous, victimised figure, thereby reproducing colonial binaries between a backward, dependent Other and an emancipated Western subject and turning non-Western women into raw material for a self-congratulatory narrative of liberal progress (Tyagi, 2014, pp. 45–50). In this perspective, gender instrumentalization in colonial and postcolonial settings is not only a matter of how imperial and nationalist projects deploy women’s images and roles to legitimize their power, but also of how certain strands of Western feminism appropriate “Third World women” as objects of rescue and representation. The analytical lens of postcolonial feminism thus foregrounds a triple dynamic of instrumentalization—by colonial authority, by patriarchal nationalism and by ethnocentric discourse—which is essential for interpreting the historical and contemporary trajectories of women’s agency in contexts such as Algeria.

1.2.3 The role of liminality

Periods of intense political upheaval are rarely neutral with regard to gender. Moments such as wars, revolutions, mass uprisings or regime crises unsettle not only institutions and borders, but also everyday routines, social hierarchies and embodied expectations. From a feminist perspective, these are precisely the junctures at which gender norms become unusually visible and malleable, as states and movements seek to mobilise populations, discipline transgression and narrate collective futures. To conceptualise these historical ruptures, it is useful to draw on the anthropological language of liminality.

Building on van Gennep's insight that liminal phases suspend ordinary classifications and open up transitional spaces, wars, civil conflicts and revolutions can be conceived as societal liminal moments in which gender orders are disrupted and renegotiated. Empirical research on armed conflict shows that such periods frequently push women into new roles as combatants, organisers, heads of household and income-earners, thereby unsettling normative boundaries of femininity and citizenship (Haeri & Puechguirbal, 2010, pp. 103–106; Afshar, 2003, pp. 178–188). Quantitative analyses of civil wars and subsequent peace settlements reveal that high-intensity conflict and negotiated peace agreements incorporating gender provisions frequently correlate with enhancements in women's political representation and broader indicators of empowerment, as women's contributions during wartime are translated—albeit imperfectly—into formal citizenship advancements (Yadav, 2020, pp. 449–61; Bakken and Buhaug, 2021, pp.1827–54; Tripp, 2023, pp.1-6). At the same time, feminist work on women's experiences in armed groups and rebel-governed territories underscores the ambivalence of these liminal gains: women's labour and participation can underpin rebel governance and militarised social reproduction, while their agency remains constrained by coercion, marginalisation from leadership and exposure to violence (Haeri & Puechguirbal, 2010). This has led scholars to argue for relational conceptions of agency and victimhood that move beyond simple dichotomies, recognising that women's acts of survival, care and everyday resistance are themselves forms of political agency in contexts of extreme uncertainty (Kreft & Schulz, 2022, , paras. 1–4). In this perspective, historical liminal moments such as civil wars, revolutions and post-conflict

transitions are double-edged: they expose women to heightened precarity and gendered violence, yet they also widen the repertoire of possible roles and claims, creating openings—often fragile and reversible—for reconfiguring gender relations.

1.3 Colonial Feminism and Postcolonial Critiques: Rethinking Gender in MENA

1.3.1 Orientalism, "colonial feminism," and the politics of rescue

Debates about women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have long been framed through an Orientalist optic that casts the "condition of women" as both the clearest symptom of cultural backwardness and the privileged terrain for civilising interventions. As Orientalism famously argues, "the Orient" is not simply a geographical referent but a *discursive* construction through which Europe produced knowledge about, and authority over, an imagined Other—an epistemic move inseparable from relations of power (Said, 1978, pp. 1–3). Within this epistemic economy, "the Muslim woman" recurrently appears as veiled, oppressed, and in need of rescue, her body and comportment functioning as metonyms for an allegedly static, patriarchal "Islamic culture" (Said, 1978, pp. 1–3; Ahmed, 1992, pp. 151–155; Abu-Lughod, 2002, pp. 783–790). *Women and Gender in Islam* conceptualises this logic as "colonial feminism": a discourse in which European officials and intellectuals denounced Muslim men's treatment of women in order to legitimise imperial rule, while remaining largely indifferent to women's broader political, economic, and civic rights (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 151–155). *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* extends this critique into the contemporary period, showing how "saving Muslim women" narratives persist in post-colonial and "war on terror" contexts, turning women's dress, mobility, and family status into symbolic proof for wider projects of security, civilisation, and modernity (Abu-Lughod, 2002, pp. 783–790; Abu-Lughod, 2013, pp. 1–14). In this sense, the "woman question" in MENA has been a paradigmatic object of gender instrumentalization by external powers: women's suffering is selectively highlighted—or strategically ignored—to justify geopolitical projects rather than to

centre women's own voices or demands (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 151–155; Abu-Lughod, 2002, pp. 783–790).

1.3.2 Islam as a contested field: patriarchy, authority, and Islamic feminism

Religion, and Islam in particular, sits at the heart of these imaginaries and has often been posited as the primary explanation for women's subordination in the region. Yet Islamic feminist and regional scholarship has shown that "Islam" operates less as a unitary cause than as a contested repertoire of texts and interpretations. Fatima Mernissi's work— particularly her *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society (1975)* and lately *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam (1991)* — on gender, sexuality and political authority in Muslim societies demonstrates how male elites have historically mobilised particular Qurʾanic verses and ḥadīths to naturalise male guardianship and restrict women's public roles, while ignoring other textual resources that would support more egalitarian arrangements (Mernissi, 1975; 1991). Similarly, contemporary Islamic feminist thinkers such as Omaima Abou-Bakr use internal hermeneutics to critique patriarchal readings of scripture and to articulate claims for gender justice grounded in Islamic norms rather than against them – incredibly relevant on this matter is her book *Feminist & Islamic Perspectives. New Horizons of Knowledge and Reform.* (Abou-Bakr, 2013). From this perspective, religious discourse itself becomes a strategic site of gender instrumentalization: states, Islamist movements and conservative ʿulamaʾ selectively invoked "authentic" Islamic gender roles to bolster projects of national authenticity, social control or moral regulation, while feminist scholars and activists seek to re-appropriate the same sources to legitimise women's rights and autonomy.

1.3.3 Gender regimes, neopatriarchy, and "bargaining with patriarchy"

Moving beyond mono-causal "Islamic culture" explanations, comparative research on gender in the MENA region underscores the importance of state formation, kinship structures, economic trajectories and legal reforms in shaping women's opportunities and constraints. Across the region, women's lives are structured by gender regimes that are deeply patriarchal yet far from static. As highlighted in Moghadam's *Modernizing Women ,* many MENA countries combine relatively high levels of female education

with persistently low labour-force participation, strong constraints embedded in family and personal status law, and continued under-representation in formal politics—patterns shaped by political economy and state strategies rather than doctrine alone (Moghadam, 2003, pp. 1–28). At the same time, intra-regional variation is substantial. North African cases such as Tunisia, Morocco and, more ambivalently, Algeria have experienced significant reforms in family law and political representation, whereas other states maintain more restrictive personal status regimes and narrower public roles for women. Rather than a homogeneous "Muslim culture," recent scholarship conceptualises the region as composed of distinct gender regimes, differentiated by patterns of state-building, kin-based power, economic development and legal change (Charrad, 2001, pp. 15–84, 145–168; Charrad, 2011, pp. 417–436; Moghadam, 2020, pp. 703–724).

The colonial past is a key dimension of this configuration. In much of North Africa, European authorities codified or selectively preserved Islamic family law while intervening more extensively in criminal, administrative and economic domains, thereby deepening a structural divide between a "modern" public sphere and a "traditional" familial domain that would later become a key site of post-independence struggle (Charrad, 2001, pp. 116–117, 139–141). Moghadam (2003, pp.1-28; 2013, pp.393-408) emphasises that incorporation into the capitalist world-system through colonialism and unequal development has shaped women's status via transformations in class structure, education and state institutions, rather than through religious doctrine alone. Building on Hisham Sharabi's notion of neopatriarchy, she characterises many MENA polities as neopatriarchal gender regimes, where state-led modernisation (mass education, public-sector employment, selective legal reforms) coexists with conservative family law and male guardianship, sustaining a "patriarchal gender contract" that ties women's citizenship to their roles as wives and mothers (Moghadam, 2003, pp.1-28; 2020, pp. 703-724). In *Gender and Society,* Deniz Kandiyoti's classic analysis of women "bargaining with patriarchy" refines this picture by showing how women deploy strategic accommodations and resistances within specific institutional configurations—above all, the patrilineal, patrilocal household she terms "classic patriarchy" in much of the Middle East (Kandiyoti, 1988, pp. 274–290).

Mounira Charrad's work on family law in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco further demonstrates how postcolonial state-building trajectories and kin-based coalitions have produced divergent legal outcomes, as ruling elites either challenged or accommodated powerful patrilineal kin groups (Charrad, 2001, pp. 68–113, 145–168; Charrad, 2011, pp. 417–436). In this perspective, personal status legislation is not merely a reflection of religious norms but a core instrument of political rule: by expanding or restricting women's rights in marriage, divorce and inheritance, states signal their ideological orientation, manage alliances with tribal and religious authorities, and address international audiences. Historical syntheses have shown that gender boundaries in Middle Eastern societies have shifted over time in response to transformations in family law, religious practices, socio-economic structures and women's own activism, underlining the flexibility and contestation surrounding supposedly "Islamic" gender norms (Moghadam 2003, pp.1-28; Ahmed, 1992). Finally, postcolonial feminist critiques, including those of Abu-Lughod, remind us that Western liberal and secular discourses have also instrumentalised "Muslim women" as symbols of backwardness or as objects of rescue, thereby reinscribing colonial hierarchies (Abu-Lughod, 2002, pp.783–790). Taken together, this body of work suggests that the MENA region is best understood as a dense field of competing projects—colonial, nationalist, Islamist, neoliberal, feminist—in which gender is persistently instrumentalised by state, religious and transnational actors, but also strategically negotiated and re-signified by women themselves (Moghadam, 2020, pp. 703–724; Charrad, 2011, pp. 417–436).

While these macro-dynamics illuminate how gender politics and Islam are repeatedly mobilised across MENA, they do not operate in a uniform geopolitical or institutional space. In North Africa, and especially in the Maghreb, the historical depth of Mediterranean entanglements and the particular weight of French colonial legal-administrative legacies shape distinctive trajectories of state-building, the governance of religious authority, and the politicisation of family law. The following section therefore narrows the lens to the Maghreb as a specific regional pathway within MENA, before focusing in detail on Algeria's own configuration and its historical turning points.

1.4 The regional context: Maghreb

1.4.1 The mediterranean framework

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is frequently treated as a coherent analytical region, yet scholarship consistently emphasizes its internal heterogeneity: while many Arab-majority polities share broad historical reference points (imperial legacies, colonial intrusions, postcolonial state-building, and contested projects of modernization), they have followed divergent institutional and socio-political pathways, producing substantial variation in governance patterns, legal regimes, and the public role of religion (Charrad, 2001; 2011; Moghadam, 2003; 2013; 2020; Walby, 2023, pp. 1-10). In order to capture this differentiation—especially for North Africa—is to treat the Mediterranean not as a mere geographic boundary but as a historical arena of circulation and power, where trade, war, diplomacy, and imperial competition have long linked the northern and southern shores and repeatedly shaped political developments in the countries bordering it (Corrao & Redaelli, 2021). Within this broader optic, the notion of "Arab Mediterranean Islam" has been proposed to highlight that Islamic life and thought in the southern Mediterranean is neither monolithic nor reducible to doctrine; rather, it is internally plural and often conflictual, evolving through the interaction between inherited traditions and modern socio-cultural and political challenges within a context of dense Euro–Mediterranean entanglements (Hashas, 2021, pp.129-156). Framing the Maghreb through "Mediterranean Islam" thus helps foreground a western Islamic regional configuration whose political authority and religious institutions have historically been shaped not only by intra-Islamic dynamics, but also by sustained cross-sea pressures and exchanges (Corrao & Redaelli, 2021; Hashas, 2021, pp.129-156).

1.4.2 Historical background

From a long-range perspective, the Maghreb's distinctiveness is also rooted in the deep layering of empires and polities prior to Islam, which created durable urban networks and coastal hierarchies later reworked—rather than erased—by Islamic conquest and

subsequent dynastic cycles (Raven, 1993; Brett & Fentress, 1997, pp. 10–80, 81–119). Phoenician foundations and Punic imperial power—crystallized in Carthage (traditionally dated to the ninth century BCE)—integrated North Africa into Western Mediterranean commercial circuits and established coastal nodes whose strategic logic long outlived Punic rule (Mederos Martín, 2019, pp. 627–644; Quinn & Vella, 2014, pp. 1–8). Roman victory in the Third Punic War (146 BCE) and the subsequent expansion of Roman Africa linked the region to imperial agrarian extraction, urban monumentalization, and an infrastructure of roads and ports that anchored Mediterranean connectivity over centuries (Hobson, 2019, pp. 183–196; Stone, 2014, pp. 565–600; Raven, 1993). Late antiquity then added further layers—Vandal and Byzantine episodes among them—while leaving in place a basic pattern in which coastal cities and certain inland corridors mattered disproportionately for taxation, security, and political control (Raven, 1993). These earlier strata matter for a Maghreb background because they help explain why later regimes—Islamic dynasties, Ottoman authorities, and French colonial rule—repeatedly concentrated on controlling strategic ports, key plains, and the administrative "hinges" between coast and interior (Raven, 1993; McDougall, 2017).

Islam's arrival did not simply "replace" this world in a single moment; rather, the Arab-Muslim conquest (seventh–eighth centuries CE) inaugurated a long process through which political authority, language, and religious legitimacy were gradually reconfigured across markedly uneven terrains and populations (Abun-Nasr, 1987, pp. 26–75). Scholarship situates the decisive military and political incorporation of North Africa into the early caliphal orbit across the late seventh century, with consolidation extending into the early eighth, while emphasizing that conquest outcomes differed sharply between more urbanized zones and regions where settlement density and state reach were thinner (Abun-Nasr, 1987, pp. 26-75; Fentress, 2022, pp.67–92). Crucially, "Amazigh/Berber" itself is not a timeless ethnic container but a historically produced category whose meanings shifted across Arabic textual traditions and political contexts—an insight that complicates any linear narrative in which "Berbers" simply become "Arabized" (Rouighi, 2011, pp.49–76). Within this complexity, classical accounts of the Maghreb nonetheless underline a durable structural feature: Islamization and Arabization were gradual, contested, and spatially uneven, unfolding through

centuries of interaction among tribal solidarities, dynastic projects, urban elites, and religious institutions (Abun-Nasr, 1987, pp. 26-75; Laroui, 1977, pp. 107–226; Rouighi, 2011, pp.49–76). Abun-Nasr's synthesis, for example, stresses that Arabic increasingly overlaid Berber languages over the long term and that a large share of Berber populations became Arabized in varying degrees, within an evolving "symbiosis" in which Islam increasingly functioned as a shared idiom of belonging and political legitimacy across communities (Abun-Nasr, 1987, pp. 26-75). Archaeological scholarship reinforces this by treating Islamization less as an abrupt conversion event than as a slow social transformation visible in material culture and everyday practices, and by emphasizing that evidentiary visibility is uneven across the western Maghreb—so that early Islamic Algeria can appear thinner archaeologically than certain Moroccan sites, a reminder that our sources themselves reflect regional asymmetries (Fentress, 2022, pp.67–92).

If the conquest opened the door, the medieval centuries gave the Maghreb a particularly clear profile as a "Muslim West" repeatedly shaped by reform movements, dynastic cycles, and shifting corridors linking the Mediterranean to Saharan routes and al-Andalus (Abun-Nasr, 1987, pp.76-143; Brett & Fentress, 1997, pp. 81–119; Laroui, 1977, pp. 157–226). Broad overviews emphasize that political authority often rested on negotiated relationships among dynasties, urban notables, and tribal coalitions—an arrangement in which religious legitimacy could be both a resource and a terrain of contestation (Laroui, 1977, pp. 227–294; Abun-Nasr, 1987, pp. 76-143). The rise of major Amazigh-led dynasties—most famously the Almoravids (eleventh–twelfth centuries) and Almohads (twelfth–thirteenth centuries)—is often treated as a decisive "Maghrebi signature" because these formations connected Atlantic Morocco, trans-Saharan axes, and Iberian arenas, while projecting ambitious state-making and religious-political reform across wide spaces (Abun-Nasr, 1987, pp. 76–143; Brett & Fentress, 1997, pp. 99–119). Later dynastic configurations—such as the Marinids, Zayyanids/ʿAbd al-Wādids, and Hafsids (broadly thirteenth–fifteenth centuries)—continued to reproduce a Maghrebi pattern in which the balance between central authority and segmented solidarities, and between coastal cities and interior linkages, remained structurally consequential (Abun-Nasr, 1987, pp. 76–143; Laroui, 1977, pp. 201–294). From the standpoint of "Islam's role," the point is not that religion

was uniformly determinative, but that Islamic repertoires (law, sanctity, scholarly authority, and reform idioms) repeatedly served as languages of legitimacy and critique across changing political orders—an interpretive axis that becomes even more visible under Ottoman and then French rule (Abun-Nasr, 1987, pp.144–205, 248–323; Laroui, 1977, pp. 243–378; Clancy-Smith, 1994).

The early modern turning point came with the Mediterranean's intensifying militarization and the Ottoman–Habsburg/Iberian contest, which reshaped the central and eastern Maghreb from the sixteenth century onward (Mantran, 1977, pp. 238–265). In this context, Ottoman-linked regimes in North Africa developed as maritime-frontier political orders sustained by privateering, port-based military power, and expanding diplomatic and commercial relations with European states (ibidem). For Algeria, modern historiography places Ottoman-era state formation (often dated from the early sixteenth century to 1830) within overlapping horizons that included local ecologies and Islamic networks but also a strongly Mediterranean political economy—meaning that Algeria's pre-colonial trajectory was already deeply entangled with European powers, long before formal colonialism (McDougall, 2017; Mantran, 1977, pp. 238–265). This is where "autonomy" matters: scholarship commonly characterizes Ottoman North African regencies as locally rooted polities that were connected to the Ottoman imperial system yet operated with substantial room for internal governance, fiscal practices, and elite reproduction, especially as they stabilized and as local military-administrative structures became entrenched (ibidem). In other words, Ottoman sovereignty in the Maghreb should be understood less as uniform provincial administration and more as a flexible imperial architecture that could accommodate distinctive frontier arrangements—an institutional feature that shaped later colonial encounters because it left in place local governing practices and religious-social institutions that France would attempt to restructure rather than inherit smoothly (McDougall, 2017; Mantran, 1977; Clark, 2021).

On religion under Ottoman rule, the essential point is not "tolerance" in an anachronistic sense but state management through legal and institutional pluralism. Across the Ottoman Empire, the rise of an "official" legal school (state *madhhab*) and the consolidation of Ottoman Hanafism as a governance-compatible legal framework is widely discussed in the literature on Ottoman law and state formation (Burak, 2013, pp.

579–602; Peters, 2005). Yet the Maghreb was historically dominated by Maliki scholarly traditions and local religious notables, meaning that Ottoman governance operated through layered arrangements in which imperial legal-administrative norms coexisted with entrenched local religious-legal landscapes rather than simply replacing them (Peters, 2005, pp.147–158; McDougall, 2017). Studies that track institutional continuities from Ottoman to French rule in Algeria show that Ottoman-era Islamic welfare and endowment structures (including financing mechanisms linked to religious institutions) were significant enough that French colonial authorities later engaged them as material infrastructures to be repurposed, regulated, or dismantled—an empirical reminder that "Islam" functioned not only as belief but as a set of socio-economic institutions embedded in governance (Clark, 2021). Taken together, Ottoman "religious policy" in the Maghreb can be framed as an imperial mode of rule that combined (i) frontier security and revenue imperatives, (ii) reliance on port-based military elites and Mediterranean commerce, and (iii) pragmatic governance of Islamic institutions through a mix of imperial legal logics and local religious authority—conditions that helped make Islam a central idiom of legitimacy but also positioned it as a target of later colonial control (Mantran, 1977; McDougall, 2017; Peters, 2005; Clark, 2021).

The decisive modern rupture is the arrival of European imperial rule, but it is crucial to stress that the Maghreb did not enter colonial domination through a single model or at a single moment. Rather, scholarship frames the nineteenth–early twentieth-century trajectory as a differentiated colonial entry, in which France constructed distinct legal-administrative arrangements and political relationships across Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, shaping the region unevenly even as French officials and observers sometimes imagined a coherent "French North Africa" (Clancy-Smith, 2010; Laroui, 1977, pp. 295–347). In Tunisia, the establishment of the French protectorate is conventionally dated to 12 May 1881, when the Treaty of Bardo (also referred to as Ksar Saïd) was concluded—an arrangement subsequently deepened by further agreements that expanded French control over internal administration (Ikeda, 2015, pp. 13–23). In Morocco, the protectorate is conventionally associated with the Treaty concluded at Fez on 30 March 1912, published contemporaneously in the American Journal of International Law, which formalized the French protectorate framework within international-legal language (American Journal of International Law, 1912).

These protectorate forms are analytically significant for a Maghrebi overview because they were treaty-based arrangements that generally preserved indigenous sovereign institutions in formal terms while constraining sovereignty in practice—producing colonial governance dynamics that differ from other colonial forms in the region (Ikeda, 2015, pp. 13–23; American Journal of International Law, 1912, pp. 207–209). Algeria, by contrast, represents an earlier and qualitatively distinct colonial entry beginning with the French capture of Algiers in 1830—a divergence widely treated in the historiography as a key asymmetry within the French Maghreb, but one that will be examined in depth only in the following, Algeria-dedicated chapter (McDougall, 2017). For the purposes of this Maghrebi framework, it is sufficient to note that the Maghreb's pathway into the modern era was shaped by Mediterranean entanglement and internal social layering, then refracted through differentiated French colonial forms across its main territories—an historical specificity that justifies narrowing the analysis to Algeria's particular trajectory next (Abun-Nasr, 1987; Mantran, 1977; Ikeda, 2014; American Journal of International Law, 1912; McDougall, 2017).

1.5 The Algerian paradigmatic trajectory of gender instrumentalization

Having established the conceptual toolkit of the study, this section turns to Algeria as the empirical case through which these concepts are operationalised. Algeria is treated here as a paradigmatic trajectory in which colonial domination, violent decolonisation, authoritarian state-building, Islamist contestation, and recurrent cycles of mass mobilisation follow one another with unusual intensity and historical compression. Across these successive ruptures, gender—and, more specifically, the figure of "the Algerian woman"—emerges as a privileged idiom of rule, resistance, and memory: a symbolic register through which political projects justify themselves, define authenticity, and demarcate enemies, while women's lived agency is simultaneously channelled, constrained, and periodically reconfigured.

The aim of this section is twofold. First, it situates the thesis within Algerian feminist and gender scholarship that has theorised these dynamics from within the history of

colonialism, nationalism, and state formation. Second, it clarifies the internal logic of the case study by presenting Algeria's contemporary history as a sequence of liminal moments—threshold periods in which categories (public/private, civic/military, secular/religious, modern/traditional) become unstable, and in which gender instrumentalization becomes particularly legible precisely because competing actors struggle to "fix" meaning and authority.

Under French rule, colonial power targeted Algerian women as a strategic site through which to claim civilisational superiority and to penetrate indigenous social worlds. The veil became a focal object of colonial fixation and intervention: unveiling campaigns in the late 1950s staged the removal of the *haïk* as a spectacle of "emancipation," while anti-colonial nationalists simultaneously invested veiling with meanings of honour, authenticity, and resistance (Fanon, 1965, pp. 35–63; MacMaster, 2009; Lazreg, 1994). In this configuration, Algerian women were subjected to a double bind: positioned as colonial subjects whose "liberation" served imperial pedagogy, and as women located within patriarchal social relations, such that their bodies and practices became both literal and symbolic terrain upon which imperial and nationalist projects were waged. In this thesis, the War of Independence functions as the first liminal threshold. It blurred boundaries between civilian and combatant and between public and private life, enabling women's participation as *moudjahidat*, *fidayate* and *moussebilate*, even as that participation was concurrently instrumentalised within competing narratives of liberation, sacrifice, and honour (Fanon, 1965, pp. 35–63; Lazreg, 2018).

The early post-independence period then re-centred the question of sovereignty: not only as territorial control, but as an effort to stabilise a moral and political order after revolutionary rupture. Here, the thesis builds on feminist scholarship showing that while women's wartime sacrifices were celebrated as a foundational national resource, women were largely marginalised from decision-making structures after 1962, their public visibility redirected into commemorative narratives and carefully regulated roles (Lazreg, 2018; Vince, 2015). The institutionalisation of women's "participation" through the UNFA is treated in Chapter 3 as emblematic of this shift: participation was channelled through the party-state's mass-organisation apparatus rather than sustained as autonomous mobilisation, narrowing women's capacity to formulate claims from

below even as the state continued to speak in the language of emancipation and national construction (Vince, 2015; Knauss, 1992, pp. 151–169). This post-independence configuration establishes a durable pattern that will recur throughout the case study: women are elevated as symbols of the nation while their political agency is absorbed into structures designed to maintain control over representation.

Following Charrad's analysis of the Maghreb, the long and conflictual process culminating in the 1984 Family Code is read here as a key moment in the consolidation of a neopatriarchal gender regime. The Code codified male guardianship, restricted women's legal capacity in crucial domains, and subordinated citizenship to a patriarchal vision of the Muslim family, even as the state promoted women's education and public-sector employment (Charrad, 2001; Salhi, 2003, pp. 133–151; Moghadam, 2003, pp. 1–28). This apparent contradiction—between symbolic celebration and legal subordination, between modernising policy and patriarchal family law—is interpreted, in line with the broader MENA literature, as a strategy of gender instrumentalization by the neopatriarchal state: women's rights are selectively expanded, deferred, or curtailed to manage social change, placate conservative constituencies, and stage a controlled, culturally anchored modernity (Moghadam, 2003, pp. 1–28; Charrad, 2001).

The "Black Decade" of the 1990s constitutes a third liminal juncture in the case study. Civil conflict between state forces and Islamist challengers dramatically intensified gendered violence and sharpened struggles over women's place in public space. In this period, highly moralised discourses about women's dress, mobility, and conduct became instruments for marking political allegiance and policing social order; women were targeted as symbols of secularism, state complicity, or transgression, while sexual and gender-based violence also occurred within the broader ecology of counter-insurgency and armed conflict (Salhi, 2010, pp. 113–124; Afshar, 2003, pp. 178–188). The thesis treats this decade as a moment in which gender instrumentalization reached a brutal apex: women's bodies became sites through which rival actors signalled piety, punishment, and authority. Yet the period also foregrounded the ambivalence that the concept of liminality is meant to capture: under conditions of heightened vulnerability, women's movements and associations—many catalysed by contestation over the Family Code—organised protests, documented abuses, and articulated feminist critiques of both

authoritarian state practices and Islamist patriarchy (Salhi, 2010, pp. 113–124; Afshar, 2003, pp. 178–188).

Finally, the trajectory culminates in contemporary protest cycles, especially Hirak, which reopens the question of legitimacy within a post–Black Decade order shaped by stability narratives and managed political space. Empirical work used in the thesis highlights women's visible participation while also documenting tensions around bodies, slogans, and spatial occupation—showing again how women can be publicly celebrated as symbols of national unity while feminist claims are pressured to remain secondary or "untimely" (El-Naggar, 2022; Volpi & Benzenine, 2023, pp. 595–613). Read through the lens developed here, Hirak does not "solve" the historical paradox; it reactivates it—while also demonstrating the persistence of women's organising as a repertoire that survives successive attempts to instrumentalise or contain it. Structured across these successive thresholds the Algerian case enables the thesis to show how gender remains a central idiom through which power is exercised and contested, and how Algerian women have persistently resisted reduction to mere instruments. Their agency is not treated here as an abstract counterpoint to oppression, but as situated practice: shaped by coercive structures, symbolic economies, and institutional constraints, yet repeatedly re-emerging in forms that unsettle the very regimes that seek to contain it (Lazreg, 2018; Vince, 2015; Moghadam, 2003, pp. 1–28; Volpi & Benzenine, 2023, pp. 595–613).

Chapter 2 - The French Colonial Era and the National Liberation

The French landing near Algiers in 1830 inaugurated the beginning of a long settler-colonial project that would reconfigure Algeria's political economy, legal order, and social hierarchies. What initially presented itself as a punitive expedition rapidly evolved into a permanent regime of occupation and territorial appropriation through which colonial authority sought to establish itself as the sole source of sovereignty. From the outset, conquest and administration were accompanied by a justificatory rhetoric of "civilisation" that framed local society as backward and in need of transformation. In this grammar, Islam functioned simultaneously as an object of knowledge and a target of management, while the organisation of the family—and, by extension, women's bodies, mobility, and rights—became a privileged site through which colonial power marked the boundary between a purportedly "modern" public sphere and a "traditional" domestic domain.

The deeper analytical problem concerns *how gender itself becomes political*: how women's bodies, visibility, sexuality, and family roles are repeatedly mobilised as instruments through which domination is justified, sovereignty is claimed, and moral boundaries are policed. In Lazreg's formulation, colonialism did not merely affect women incidentally; it reshaped the conditions under which women could be seen, spoken for, or heard. The nineteenth century, she argues, brought down "a mantle of invisibility" over Algerian women, spun through contradictory colonial policies and native responses, producing a structural gap between women's symbolic centrality and women's authorial voice (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 33–34). This chapter traces the origins of that gap and demonstrates how it grew during the war: women became operationally indispensable and symbolically powerful, but they were frequently narratively contained through moralized templates and the institutional politics of recognition, which included postwar "admittance" into nationalist memory, bureaucratic legibility, and propaganda. These mechanisms shaped not only how women participated, but also how that participation could be publicly named. (Guardi, 2014; Lazreg, 2018; Perego, 2015; Sajed, 2021; Vince, 2015).

The chapter's methodology blends a gendered, multi-source understanding of colonial governance and nationalist mobilization with political chronology. The narrative spine refers to McDougall's A History of Algeria (McDougall, 2017) for the longue durée architecture of French rule, which includes conquest, "pacification," colonial expansion, and the evolving repertoire of nationalism and reformism. Following Keswani's reconstruction of how women's "condition" became a policy object and a discourse through which sovereignty and "civilization" were argued, the analysis then applies a gendered institutional lens that treats land, education, and family regulation as technologies of rule and sites of political contestation (Keswani, 2002). To avoid treating women as a thematic add-on to political history, the chapter adopts Lazreg's central methodological warning: women's visibility is historically produced—through violence, displacement, and the social politics of seclusion—so "silence" must be read not only as cultural absence but also as an effect of institutions and power (Lazreg, 2018).

For the late-colonial turn to associational politics, the chapter relies on MacMaster's empirical mapping of women's organisations and party-linked mobilisations (UFA, UDMA/JUDMA, reformist schooling milieus, PPA/MTLD networks), treating women's organising as a differentiated political field rather than a single "women's movement" (MacMaster, 2009, 2020). The wartime sections are approached as a struggle over gender meanings as much as a struggle over territory: French "emancipation" is analysed as a counter-insurgency repertoire with specific propaganda mechanisms (visual evidence, staged unveiling, mobilisation through EMSI/SAS networks), drawing on Perego, while nationalist recognition is read through the moral and narrative templates that render women legible as heroines/victims/supporters (Perego, 2015; Vince, 2015; Guardi, 2014). Finally, the chapter operationalises Sajed's notion of "admittance" to explain how women can be symbolically central to national memory while remaining politically circumscribed, and it uses Lazreg's critique of certification and bureaucratic legibility to show how postwar silencing is structurally produced rather than simply "forgotten" (Sajed, 2021, 2023; Lazreg, 2018).

To maintain coherence while preserving chronology, the chapter is organised into five linked sections that reflect the actual structure: (2.1) the colonial era as a gendered

system of rule (conquest, displacement, legal/familial governance); (2.2) the late-colonial emergence of women's organisations through party ecologies and reformist schooling; (2.3) the war as a dual struggle over sovereignty and gender legitimacy (French counter-insurgency "emancipation" vs. nationalist boundary-making); (2.4) repertoires of women's agency across urban cells, maquis spaces, and rural infrastructures, read through constraints of class, coercion, and narratability; and (2.5) the postwar politics of recognition, where memory, bureaucracy, and moral regulation shape what forms of women's action can be publicly named and converted into citizenship (McDougall, 2017; Keswani, 2002; MacMaster, 2009; Perego, 2015; Vince, 2015; Guardi, 2014; Sajed, 2021, 2023; Lazreg, 2018).

2.1 Origin and features of French colonial era (1830-1954)

2.1.1 Before 1830: Kinship order, domestic authority, and women's social role

On the eve of the French invasion, Algerian society was largely organised through extended kinship formations in which authority, inheritance, and social belonging were structured through patrilineal and patriarchal lines. Within this configuration, women's formal rights and public standing were subordinated to men's, and norms governing honour, marriage, and domestic conduct positioned women as dependants within a hierarchy centred on male guardianship (Keswani, 2002, pp. 30–31).However, subordination alone cannot be the starting point for a women-centered baseline. According to Lazreg, precolonial Algeria was not socially homogeneous; rather, it exhibited a range of sociopolitical modes and lifestyles, from rural and southern settings influenced by various material and moral economies to a commercial and maritime Algiers closely linked to Mediterranean circuits (Lazreg, 2018, p. 23). In fact, ethnic origin (for the Turks) and kinship, tribe, or clan among native Algerians were used to organize identity more so than strict class cultures (Lazreg, 2018, p. 25). Indeed, identity was organised less through rigid class cultures than through ethnic origin (for the Turks) and kinship, tribe, or clan among native Algerians (ibidem). This helps frame women's social roles as embedded in systems where the household and the lineage were

not merely private units but foundational structures of identity, protection, and collective continuity. In these situations, "domesticity" is not the antithesis of politics; rather, it is one of the main locations where political order is replicated in daily life. The provision of food, textile work, childrearing, and household management were all tasks performed by women that were inextricably linked to the material reproduction of the extended family and, consequently, to the perpetuation of social hierarchies and local solidarity (Keswani, 2002, pp. 30–31). This labor carried a form of authority even when it was socially delimited: women helped to transmit moral standards, reputational boundaries, and daily norms that stabilized group life through the socialization of children (ibidem).

A second dimension of women's agency concerns ritual and oral-cultural transmission. Here it is crucial to treat cultural practices not as "folklore" but as social organisation. Women's gatherings structured around oral forms—poetry, storytelling, ritualised speech—can operate as infrastructures of cohesion by circulating counsel, regulating affect, and producing shared interpretations of experience. Scholarship on Algerian women's oral forms, including *buqālah* practices, explicitly treats these gatherings as female-coded institutions that encode values and sustain communal idioms under strain (Slyomovics, 2014, pg 145-168). The fact that women's organizational roles are frequently performed through the feminized spaces that maintain continuity and resilience is a tangible example of why a women-centered approach opposes equating agency with overt confrontation.

Third, a patriarchal kinship system that still depended on women's relational labor to function often employed women as kinship brokers. Before 1954, Algerian women's lives were structured formally under male guidance (father/guardian prior to marriage, husband during marriage, and, if widowed, frequently sons or the husband's family). This framed marriage as a family governance mechanism rather than a personal decision (Keswani, 2002, p. 18). Additionally, marriage functioned as a tool for households to negotiate alliance, honor, and authority through material and symbolic transactions between families, such as dowry arrangements and, in certain situations, payments made through the bride's father (Keswani, 2002, p. 18; Keswani, 2002, p. 57). However, kinship stability hinged on women's daily tasks of preserving relationships, organizing

responsibilities, and handling dependence because they were situated at the intersection of natal and affinal groups. In times of disruption (divorce, widowhood, or rejection), the extended family was supposed to "absorb" women by taking them back and relocating them within the kin group until a new marital arrangement could be arranged (Keswani, 2002, p. 18).When we examine household survival and inheritance discipline, the brokerage role becomes very apparent. As colonial reforms introduced inheritance rights, women who claimed a legal share risked ostracism by family and village, demonstrating how kinship solidarity was maintained through gendered pressure and social sanctions. In Kabylia, customary norms sought to keep property circulating "male-to-male" within the extended family, which defined itself as responsible for supporting widows and unmarried women (Keswani, 2002, p. 58). As another example of how women's security was negotiated through family mechanisms rather than independent property rights, families may use tools like the habous system to ensure a woman an income while still preventing the fragmentation of land (Keswani, 2002, p. 58). In short, marriage could operate as a patriarchal governance mechanism regulating honour and alliance, but women's agency often appeared as relational governance inside constraint: sustaining households, negotiating dependence, and stabilising social resources in ways that were politically consequential even when not publicly visible (Keswani, 2002, pp. 18, 57–58).

Most importantly, Lazreg insists that gender relations varied significantly by region despite the normative frame of *shari'a*; it is precisely these variations that would later be "blunted as the colonial era sets in" (Lazreg, 2018, p. 28). A precolonial baseline, then, should be understood as a field of differentiated practices rather than a single template. Women and men saw themselves as Muslims, but conduct was shaped by location in family or tribal communities and, at times, by individual needs (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 33–34). Therefore, colonial domination produces what Lazreg later characterizes as a unique form of female invisibility in the nineteenth century by gradually narrowing and politicizing a variable landscape of gender relations rather than merely encountering a fixed gender order (ibidem). The French project of conquest and governance would unavoidably intersect with gendered domains—family organization, moral authority, and the control of daily life—where women were not only regulated but

also positioned as crucial agents in the upkeep and negotiation of social order, as this pre-colonial baseline makes clear (ibidem).

2.1.2 From Expedition to Exception: Conquest and the Gendered Foundations of Colonial Rule (1830–1839)

The French landing near Algiers in 1830 inaugurated not simply a military episode but the start of a settler-colonial project that progressively reconfigured Algeria's sovereignty, political economy, and social hierarchies. The expedition did not initially follow a coherent imperial blueprint: it escalated out of a long diplomatic-financial dispute tied to the Bacri/Buşnac debt claims from the 1790s and the April 1827 *coup d'éventail*, which French authorities reframed as an affront to national "honour," followed by an ineffective three-year blockade and the 1830 landing—also shaped by the Bourbon monarchy's search for prestige and domestic authority (McDougall, 2017, pp. 50–51). From the outset, colonial legitimation relied on a civilising grammar that quickly absorbed women into its moral repertoire: the "condition" of Muslim women was repeatedly mobilised as evidence of alleged backwardness, turning gender into a symbolic terrain through which conquest could be justified (Keswani, 2002, p. 30). A key mechanism through which this symbolic terrain was converted into an administrative boundary was *citizenship law itself*. Vince notes that a law passed on 14 July 1865 declared the indigenous Muslim man "French," but withheld full citizenship unless he renounced "Muslim personal status" in matters of family law (Vince, 2015, pp. 72–73). What the colonial state framed as 'gendered customs'—polygamy, repudiation, paternal choice of spouses, inheritance asymmetries, and even doctrines such as the "sleeping child"—thus operated as a juridical rationale for the political exclusion of the colonised majority (ibidem). In other words, the family was not just a metaphor of difference; it was a legal filter for political membership, embedding gender relations into the architecture of colonial sovereignty (ibidem).

In the first years after the fall of Algiers, occupation remained unstable in both Algeria and Paris. Competing commanders tested different modalities of rule—from indirect arrangements to tentative "model" colonisation—while coercion on the ground included forms of arbitrary force and symbolic violation that produced fear and hostility

(McDougall, 2017, pp. 54–57). The decisive institutional turn came with the 1833–34 debates and inquiries that endorsed permanent occupation; the ordinance of 22 July 1834 established a military governor-general ruling by decree, creating what McDougall describes as a durable colonial "state of exception" that bypassed accountability and denied legal recourse to the conquered (McDougall, 2017, pp. 56–58). This architecture mattered for women's condition in two interconnected ways: it intensified exposure to violence and administrative arbitrariness at the household level, and it laid the groundwork for treating the reorganisation of social relations—especially those governed through family and morality—as a strategic object of rule rather than an incidental by-product. (McDougall, 2017, pp. 56–58; Keswani, 2002, pp. 42–43; 62–63).

2.1.3 Absolute Conquest and Social Dislocation: Gendered Violence and the Household Under War (1839–1847)

The shift from precarious occupation to large-scale conquest hardened at the end of the 1830s, when "restricted occupation" gave way to a more expansionist posture and the struggle over sovereignty broadened in the interior (McDougall, 2017, pp. 58–60). In this context, Emir Abd al-Qadir consolidated a religio-political authority in the west after 1837, relayed through provincial deputies (*khalifas)*, even as rival authorities contested his reach (McDougall, 2017, pp. 66–68). The breakdown of the Tafna settlement and the renewal of war in 1839 opened the most violent phase of early colonisation: McDougall treats the October 1839 "Iron Gates" march as a rupture that propelled the French toward a logic of "absolute conquest" (McDougall, 2017, pp. 68–70). Under Governor-General Bugeaud (from 1841), scorched-earth tactics—flying columns, inland lines, destruction of agriculture and stores—aimed to devastate the material basis of resistance and force surrender (McDougall, 2017, pp. 69–73).

The conquest environment produced forms of specifically gendered exposure: as Lazreg emphasises, women suffered the violence of military operations alongside men but were often subjected to additional humiliations and sexualised coercion that reflected women's particular vulnerability under occupation (Lazreg, 2018, p. 41). More broadly, she characterises the French colonial venture as both protracted and exceptionally

brutal, noting that the early decades of penetration were marked by massacres during captures and campaigns and occurred in a context where constraints comparable to later international rules of warfare were not operative (Lazreg, 2018, p. 41). As villages were burned, food systems destroyed, and populations uprooted, the domestic sphere became materially precarious and socially pressured—precisely the terrain where women's labour sustained everyday survival. This is also why, as Keswani suggests, the household gained heightened symbolic weight: under conditions of violent disruption, women were increasingly positioned as custodians of continuity inside a family space that was itself being destabilised by war and displacement (Keswani, 2002, p. 42).

2.1.4 Pacification as Social Control: Displacement, Seclusion, and Sexual Economies (1847–1870)

After Abd al-Qadir's surrender in 1847, French rule shifted from high-intensity conquest to a long, uneven project of "pacification" and administrative entrenchment, though without stable consent or uniform control (McDougall, 2017, pp. 71–74). Revolt persisted in fragmented forms—often shaped by dispossession, ecological stress, taxation, and the expanding security perimeter of settlement—while accommodation also widened as notables and religious leaders navigated a practical politics of "working the system" (McDougall, 2017, pp. 73–76; 80–83). This phase is where women's condition can be read both through battlefield violence and the consolidation of social control. Lazreg underlines that the nineteenth century brought not only economic loss but social instability: relocations and forced movements designed to secure control uprooted families, exposed women to the strains of adaptation, and could include the exile or removal of male relatives—events women often experienced with limited power to prevent them (Lazreg, 2018, p. 47).

In this context, seclusion and veiling acquired intensified political meaning. Lazreg argues that as some men sought protection through reduced interaction with the colonial world, the same logic translated into stronger restrictions on women, while veiling increasingly functioned as a protective response to a colonial gaze experienced as invasive and debasing; the symbolic boundary between "protection" and "exposure" hardened, and women's respectability became a key site where domination was felt and

resisted (Lazreg, 2018, p. 53). This deepened gender asymmetries: over time, more men could enter colonial circuits through schooling or commerce, while most women remained structurally excluded, widening the gap between male access to colonial institutions and female confinement outside them (ibidem).

Pacification also involved the management of sexuality and the emergence of gendered coercive economies. Lazreg links early colonial control of women's sexuality to phenomena such as sex tourism and the transformation of certain women—particularly those already marginalised by socio-economic upheaval—into targets of prostitution systems that expanded alongside uprooting and pauperisation up to the late 1870s (Lazreg, 2018, p. 55). She further stresses that policing practices and identification regimes could feed into coercive sexual economies, while trafficking in women operated as a daily reality that gave the colonial administration an additional lever of social control, even as nationalist critiques framed women as central to cultural integrity (Lazreg, 2018, p. 58). These dynamics show how "the woman question" was not only rhetorical: women's bodies, mobility, and sexual reputations became practical terrains through which colonial order was stabilised and indigenous society was governed (Keswani, 2002, p. 30).

2.1.5 The 1871 Insurrection as Turning Point: Punitive Settlement and Governing Through the Family (1870–1871)

By the 1850s–1860s colonial power combined settler expansion with selective forms of indirect management where colonisation remained thin; in parts of the Constantinois, French "native policy" up to 1870 could operate like a protectorate over local grandees administered through the army's Arab-affairs apparatus, even while Algeria remained locked into a coercive order overall (McDougall, 2017, p. 80). This hybrid arrangement was fragile because it simultaneously relied on local hierarchies and eroded them through land loss, fiscal pressure, and administrative intrusion. The defeat of France in Europe in 1870 intensified uncertainty and sharpened settler expectations of a more civilian, settler-driven regime, helping create the conditions for the 1871 rupture (McDougall, 2017, pp. 80–81).

The 1871 insurrection—often treated as the largest uprising of the nineteenth century—exposed how shallow "accommodation" had become. Muhammad al-Hajj al-Muqrani — a hereditary notable in eastern Algeria (McDougall, 2017, pp. 77–78) — attacked Bordj-Bou-Arreridj in March 1871, initially seeking leverage at a moment of perceived imperial weakness. When negotiations were refused, the revolt rapidly widened from an elite-led challenge into mass mobilisation, amplified after Shaykh al-Haddad of the Rahmaniyya —the head of the Rahmaniyya Sufi (McDougall, 2017, pp. 78–79) — issued a call to jihad on 8 April 1871; within weeks, thousands rose across the east and centre and the uprising spread toward Algiers and deep into the Sahara before being crushed by reinforcements later that year (ibidem). Repression signalled a brutal redistribution of power: settler militias participated in indiscriminate violence, and even official inquiries recorded killings of innocents by police and militia (ibidem). The punitive settlement that followed—executions, deportations to New Caledonia, massive land confiscations, and an indemnity of 36.5 million francs—reduced whole regions, especially Kabylia, to penury and accelerated the settler-colonial land regime (ibidem). The material consequences of this punitive settlement—land loss, impoverishment, and household insecurity—sharpened women's exposure to survival pressures inside the family economy. Therefore, women became symbolically central to competing projects of rule and resistance, precisely as their everyday autonomy and their capacity to speak authoritatively remained structurally constrained by colonial coercion and by patriarchal boundary-making (Keswani, 2002, pp. 62–63; Lazreg, 2018, p. 53).

2.1.6 1871–1912: Post-Insurrection Consolidation and Governing Through the Family

The punitive settlement that followed the 1871 revolt did not inaugurate a stable colonial "peace" so much as a new configuration of domination in which coercion, fiscal extraction, and settler expansion became even more tightly fused. In McDougall's account, the post-1871 order deepened a long-term pattern whereby "pacification" remained a protracted, uneven process of territorial incorporation and social control, repeatedly generating unrest rather than securing durable consent. The destructive pressures of colonisation—dispossession, taxation, and administrative

intrusion—interacted with ecological shocks to reproduce recurrent crises across the countryside, making the maintenance of order dependent on periodic punitive campaigns and the continuous reassertion of state power (McDougall, 2017, p. 77). This dynamic extended well beyond the Kabylia heartland of 1871: unrest reappeared on multiple frontiers, while the Sahara itself was incorporated only gradually and unevenly into the colonial space, underscoring that the territorial project remained incomplete deep into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (McDougall, 2017, p. 75). At the same time, episodes of rural revolt in the later period reveal the interpretive struggle surrounding Algerian resistance: settler society repeatedly read insurrections through the language of religious "fanaticism," whereas McDougall emphasises that local actors consistently articulated grievances in terms of administrative injustice, expropriation, and political invisibility—an asymmetry that further legitimised coercive governance and punitive social engineering (McDougall, 2017, p. 85).

This post-1871 "security" regime also helps explain why the family emerged as an increasingly strategic site of colonial intervention. French strategies increasingly sought to reorder Algerian society "at its roots," targeting institutions that directly shaped everyday authority and cultural continuity—above all, the family and the domestic sphere. In this framework, women were not simply "subjects" of policy but became a privileged point of entry for the broader colonial project: French discourse repeatedly framed the transformation of women as a pathway to transforming society, encapsulated in the maxim that it is "through women" that one may capture the "soul" of a nation (Keswani, 2002, pp. 62–63). The importance of this logic is that it clarifies how gender entered colonial governance not primarily through an emancipatory agenda, but through instrumentalisation: women's "condition" was mobilised rhetorically and administratively as a means of legitimising domination and undermining indigenous moral authority, rather than centring women's autonomy as an end in itself (ibidem). Kabylia was taken as a key laboratory for this approach: the colonial authorities experimented with legal and administrative projects in the region, including attempts to reshape family legislation under an "assimilationist" rationale—efforts premised on the idea that reorganising domestic life and personal status norms could weaken the cultural and juridical foundations of Algerian society (ibidem). Education functioned as a

parallel lever. Rather than a neutral "modernising" project, schooling often operated as a targeted instrument of social reordering: Keswani describes the establishment of schools in Kabylia after the major insurrection as a deliberate strategy—implanting educational institutions "in the heart" of a rebellious zone to consolidate authority and reshape cultural orientations (Keswani, 2002, pp. 74–75). Crucially, the gender content of this educational project remained sharply differentiated. Earlier in the colonial period, girls' schooling had been minimal, fragile, and heavily oriented toward domestic skills (Keswani, 2002, pp. 32; 47–48); after 1871, even as schooling expanded as a governance technology, the "woman question" continued to be treated primarily as a means to reshape the family as a unit of social discipline rather than as a pathway to women's political inclusion (Keswani, 2002, pp. 62–63). At the societal level, these dynamics contributed to a paradox: the domestic sphere became both more pressured materially—through confiscation, taxation, and insecurity—and more symbolically charged, since cultural continuity was increasingly imagined as residing in family practices, moral norms, and gendered boundaries. Women thus came to occupy a doubly instrumental position: colonial governance cast them as the "key" to social transformation, while indigenous patriarchal and emerging nationalist imaginaries often positioned them as custodians of cultural authenticity within a domestic sphere now framed as a refuge of identity. In this sense, the post-1871 decades consolidated a pattern in which the family functioned simultaneously as an object of colonial intervention and a defensive site of social reproduction—setting the stage for the early twentieth-century shift, characterized by more articulated forms of political mobilisation and civic claims that would culminate in the new reformist vocabulary emerging around 1911–1912 (McDougall, 2017, p. 85).

2.1.7 1912–1954: Reformism, Nationalism, and the Gendered Boundary of Citizenship

By the early twentieth century, the repertoire of Algerian politics saw a gradual shift: while refusal and avoidance of the colonial state persisted, they increasingly overlapped with assertive demands framed in the idioms of rights, reform, and

citizenship—especially around conscription and representation (McDougall, 2017, pp. 148–149). The "Young Algerians" leveraged the question of military service to press for reforms without renouncing the *statut personnel*, and later interwar reformist and nationalist currents expanded political mobilisation through associations, the press, schools, and mass meetings (McDougall, 2017, pp. 170–171; 174–175). These politics were not "gender-blind": interwar public debate staged tensions over education, moral reform, and "changing norms of gender and generation within the family," even as the colonial state extended its reach into Algerian society only reluctantly and unevenly (McDougall, 2017, p. 146). Women's education, however, remained severely constrained: by 1938 less than 5% of Algerian girls received any education and that most girls' classes functioned as workrooms teaching domesticity and handicrafts; free and compulsory public instruction would not be extended to girls until 1958 (McDougall, 2017, p. 146). Scholarship also shows how "modernisation" through education often carried a domesticating logic: educated male reformists increasingly wanted wives with some schooling, but still framed women primarily as mothers and as custodians of national cultural identity, locating women at the centre of the clash between tradition and modernity without endorsing a fundamental transformation of gender roles (Keswani, 2002, p. 61). In other words, both colonial and reformist projects could converge in treating women as a crucial battleground for the future—yet not necessarily as autonomous political subjects (Keswani, 2002, pp. 62–63).
In the final decades before 1954, the widening of political mobilisation and the hardening of colonial constraints produced the conditions for a revolutionary break. Interwar politics became increasingly febrile and polarised, with movements such as the *Parti du Peuple Algérien* (PPA; Party of the Algerian People) developing mass symbolic mobilisation amid repression and rivalry (McDougall, 2017, pp. 174–175). Focusing on the gendered social landscape of late colonialism, although full assimilation was not achieved, the long process of destabilising the existing system—especially through the erosion of traditional family structures—had advanced significantly by the eve of the war (Keswani, 2002, p. 61). Furthermore, the still high percentages of illiterate Algerian women by 1954 – 95% – demonstrate how limited colonial "progress" was for most women (ibidem).
Scholarship also suggests the consolidation of nationalist politics as inseparable from

the wider social pressures generated by late colonialism. The movement's organisational trajectory —from the *Étoile Nord-Africaine* (1926) to the PPA – (1937), then the *Mouvement Pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques* – MTLD – (1946) and its clandestine *Organisation Spéciale* (dismantled in 1950) — culminated in the leadership crisis that produced the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) and the armed insurrection of 1 November 1954 (Keswani, 2002, p. 73). Across this pre-1954 phase, the "woman question" functioned less as an autonomous agenda than as a postponed promise: treated as politically important, yet consistently deferred until after independence on the grounds that colonial rule foreclosed substantive reform (Keswani, 2002, p. 73). Precisely because colonial rule politicised women through the governance of personal status, education, and domestic norms—and because nationalist projects simultaneously framed women as custodians of authenticity and moral order—the late colonial period produced what can be described as a gendered boundary of citizenship: women's visibility, schooling, and family status became key markers through which communal belonging and political legitimacy were defined and policed. The result was a specific paradox. Women were central to the imagined future of the nation and to competing projects of "modernisation" and "authenticity," yet their political subjecthood remained persistently circumscribed and frequently treated as conditional or postponable. It is within this tension—between politicisation and containment—that the first organised forms of Algerian women's collective mobilisation emerged in the 1940s and early 1950s, developing repertoires of association, welfare work, political education, and clandestine organisation that would later shape women's participation in the liberation struggle.

2.2 Algerian women's first organizations

By the early twentieth century, Algerian political mobilisation increasingly moved from repertoires of refusal and avoidance to more assertive claims articulated in the language of rights, reform, and citizenship—especially around representation, conscription, and the institutional reconfiguration of "Muslim status" within the colonial order (McDougall, 2017, pp. 148–149). Yet the politics of citizenship in colonial Algeria were

also *gendered by design*: both colonial administrators and competing Algerian movements repeatedly treated women not simply as social actors, but as a strategic "site" through which to regulate community boundaries, moral authority, and the legitimacy of political futures. In this sense, women's access to education, public space, and association became a core terrain on which colonial governance and anti-colonial projects defined what counted as "modernity," "authenticity," and political membership (Keswani, 2002, pp. 61–63; McDougall, 2017, p. 146).

2.2.1 A late organisational emergence in comparative perspective

In regional comparative terms, Algerian women's collective organisation emerged relatively late and under unusually restrictive conditions. While several Middle Eastern had already settings where women's associations were active in the 1920s-1930s and where interwar congresses facilitated cross-regional circulation of agendas (from unveiling debates to citizenship and suffrage) the first organised Algerian women's movements (1944-1954) largely urban and socially narrow, with limited reach into the countryside because of poverty, geographic isolation, and mass female illiteracy (MacMaster, 2009, p. 30). Placing this late emergence in comparative perspective, Egypt saw the institutionalisation of the elite-led feminist mobilisation with Huda Shaʿarawi, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923, which anchored a programme that linked women's rights claims (education, legal reforms, public visibility) to anti-colonial politics and to international feminist circuits (Quawas, 2006). This organisational momentum was paralleled by an "Eastern" (or inter-Asian/Middle Eastern) conference infrastructure that enabled activists to meet, exchange programmes, and claim a public voice across borders. The First Eastern Women's Congress (Damascus, 1930) and the Second Eastern Women's Congress (Tehran, 1932)—analysed as key moments of interwar feminist transnationalism—brought together women's organisations and elite feminist figures around reformist agendas that blended nationalism with claims for women's advancement (Weber, 2008). A partially overlapping arena of international feminist diplomacy was also visible in the Twelfth Congress of the International Alliance of Women held in Istanbul (1935), which Libal

shows became a major stage for contestations over women's emancipation, state-led modernisation, and the international politics of "progress" (Libal, 2008). Finally, explicitly Arab anti-colonial feminist coordination was strengthened by the Eastern Women's Congress in Defense of Palestine (Cairo, 15–18 October 1938), convened at the invitation of Sha'rawi and the EFU, and attended by delegations from Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran (Institute for Palestine Studies, 1938). Against that backdrop, the Maghreb presents a more uneven and discontinuous landscape: Tunisia did develop its own associational initiatives in the mid-1930s—most notably through the formation of the Union of Muslim Women of Tunisia (UMFT) in 1936, a landmark in Tunisian women's mobilisation under colonial rule (Bakalti, 1996). Crucially, however, Tunisian women were not wholly absent from interwar transregional circuits: Kallander documents that Habiba Menshari, a Tunisian nationalist active with socialist politics, attended the Second Eastern Women's Congress in Tehran (1932), indicating that at least some Maghrebi participation existed—though often through individual figures rather than consolidated national women's unions comparable to the EFU (Kallander, 2021). In Morocco, meanwhile, much of the scholarship dates the crystallisation of an identifiable women's movement to the later colonial period: Sadiqi traces a formative starting point to 1946, associated with early organisational initiatives (including *Akhawat al-Safaa*) and the emergence of women's claims in the public sphere under nationalist-party umbrellas (Sadiqi, 2008, pg.133–151), a chronology that also appears in contemporary Moroccan feminist historiography (Glacier, 2012). It is precisely in this comparative frame—where interwar feminist internationalism was already active in parts of the Mashreq, while Maghrebi trajectories remained more fragmented—that MacMaster's empirical conclusion becomes especially salient for Algeria: despite the proliferation of interwar conferences and federations elsewhere, "Algerian women delegates appear to have been totally absent" from those international meetings (MacMaster, 2009, p. 30). This should not be understood as cultural lag, but as the product of Algeria's settler-colonial specificity—its relative intellectual isolation from Middle Eastern political ferment *combined with* an unusually repressive French regime that policed persons and ideas moving across borders, paranoid about pan-Islamic and pan-Arab currents that could threaten the "most prized" colony (MacMaster, 2009, p. 30). This

absence matters analytically: it indicates that the formative international congress circuit associated with early Arab feminism did not serve as a direct organisational template for Algerian women; instead, Algerian women's politicisation developed through localised, constrained, and often surveilled channels, shaped by the colonial state's architecture and the internal logics of Algerian parties and reformist networks. Furhtermore, the discursive field itself appeared to be colonised: between roughly 1900 and 1944, public debate about Algerian women was largely monopolised by metropolitan and colonial French women, many of whom framed Muslim women through Orientalist stereotypes (child marriage, polygamy, repudiation, seclusion, "feudal patriarchy"), and pursued emancipation through republican rights, secular law, and education—projects that frequently reproduced colonial hierarchies even when articulated in feminist idioms (ibidem). The "woman question" was not absent in colonial Algeria—it was often *spoken for* and *governed through*, before Algerian women could institutionalise their own associational voice.

2.2.2 The late-colonial breakthrough (1944–54): four strands of women's organising

Within this constrained environment, the decade 1944–54 becomes the critical phase in which Algerian women begin to organise in ways that are historically traceable, politically differentiated, and increasingly consequential. This period could be reconstructed as the emergence of multiple currents rather than a single women's movement, each one of which tightly linked to the party field of late colonial politics. Women's agency develops *inside* a crowded political ecology—communist, liberal-reformist, ulema-reformist, and populist-nationalist—each offering a distinct model of women's participation and a distinct definition of emancipation (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 38–46; 58).

(1) Communist-led mass social activism: the UFA as a school of political practice.

One major channel of women's organisation opened under communist leadership. The Union des Femmes d'Algérie (UFA) was created in 1943 under the aegis of the Algerian Communist Party (PCA), and by 1944–51 it gathered 10,000–15,000 members

and published its journal *Femmes d'Algérie* (Salhi, 2010, p. 114). In terms of mobilisation, the UFA developed campaigns focused on concrete socio-economic and civic claims—cost of living protests during the hunger years of 1944–45, denunciations of discriminatory rationing, demands for equal access to social security and pensions for Muslim women, challenges to the exclusion of Muslim children from primary schools, and mobilisation against political repression and electoral fraud (MacMaster, 2009, p. 36). This current connected women's local struggles to international anti-colonial solidarities: at the UFA's 1949 congress, delegations from the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) linked women's emancipation to anti-colonial liberation globally, while Algerian delegates attended and reported back from international conferences (ibidem). Even if the UFA did not represent most Algerian women, it functioned as an infrastructure of politicisation—petitions, meetings, demonstrations, public speaking, electoral campaigns—that trained a cohort of women in associational life and public claim-making (ibidem). In 1945 the PCA even stood two Muslim women candidates in the 1945 municipal elections, both of whom won seats—an exceptional move in the colonial context (ibidem). At the same time, the Union was internally fragile and socially divided: as Muslim women began to outnumber Europeans after 1947, many European members withdrew ("white flight"), and deeper tensions surfaced over nationalism, secularism, and the meaning of veiling (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 38–39). This internal conflict demonstrates that women's organising was never outside politics; it was a contested political field in its own right.

(2) Liberal-reformist secular feminism around the UDMA/JUDMA: Egypt as a reference, but Algeria as a different battlefield.

A second current emerged under Ferhat Abbas's *Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algérien* (UDMA; Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto) , especially through its youth branch (JUDMA). In the early 1950s, *La République algérienne* carried interviews with Egyptian feminists linked to the Egyptian Feminist Union and other organisations; Egypt, in the postwar era, "served as a beacon" for emerging feminist and Arab nationalist struggles and the Egyptian discourse arrives as a *comparative mirror* that radicalises some Algerian voices and exposes the particular violence of the Algerian colonial setting (MacMaster, 2009, p. 38). The letters and debates MacMaster

analyses articulate themes of "double oppression" and contest customary practices—forced marriage, repudiation, seclusion, and the veil—while also encountering intense male backlash and harassment that pushed women back into domestic space (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 40–41). This strand demonstrates how women's agency did not only emerge as "social work" or "support roles," but also as ideological production: women writing, debating, challenging male political leadership, and fighting over the normative meaning of emancipation—while being forced to argue that emancipation was compatible with Islam and that patriarchal customs were not authentic religious imperatives (ibidem). In other words, the UDMA/JUDMA milieu supplies an early example of women's agency as *discursive struggle* over legitimacy, modernity, and national identity, under conditions of surveillance and social hostility.

(3) Islamic reformism (ulema/islāḥ) and girls' schooling: enabling and limiting agency.

A third pathway for women's politicisation ran through reformist education networks. MacMaster shows that *médersa* and "free school" environments could become politicising spaces for girls: women activists describe moving from French primary schooling into modern "free" schools that combined Arabic learning with nationalist instruction, including banned hymns and lessons about colonisation and future revolution (MacMaster, 2009, p. 45). He notes that reformist-led *médersa* schools played a progressive role in expanding girls' education, and cites reformist discourse linking women's instruction to freedom and independence (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 45–46). Yet this channel remained constrained by a conservative gender project: education was legitimated less as individual emancipation or equality than as a tool for Arabo-Islamic renaissance and moral regulation; segregation and the policing of female behaviour remained central, and major reformist leaders opposed women's suffrage on the grounds that it would provoke discord (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 46–47). This tension is analytically central for interpreting late-colonial women's mobilisation. Reformist (*islāḥ*) networks could widen women's partial access to public life—through schooling, associational spaces, and forms of nationalist pedagogy—while simultaneously reinscribing women within a gender ideology that cast them primarily as guardians of family morality and as symbolic boundary-markers of the nation. So

women's expanding participation, education and politicization often remained structured by a project of national authenticity that continued to govern women's roles, visibility, and legitimacy in explicitly gendered terms.

(4) Populist nationalism (PPA/MTLD) and women's clandestine cells: agency inside a party apparatus.

The fourth strand is the nationalist current around the PPA/MTLD and the eventual creation of the Association des Femmes Musulmanes Algériennes (AFMA). From the Étoile Nord-Africaine (1926) through 1954, Messalist nationalism did not formulate a detailed women's policy; early activism was concentrated among male migrant workers in France, limiting women's direct participation (MacMaster, 2009, p. 46). However, as nationalist organisations shifted into Algeria and expanded its social penetration, women began to be drawn into radical currents, including through clandestine women's cells founded from 1946 and the creation of the AFMA in 1947 (ibidem). Precisally, Salhi dates the foundation of the Association des Femmes Musulmanes Algériennes (AFMA) to 2 July 1947, identifying Mamia Chentouf and Nafissa Hamoud as its founders and showing how the association combined relief work—support to families affected by the repression of May 1945, care for the sick, and the distribution of food and clothing—with political consciousness-raising and encouragement of girls' education (Salhi, 2010, p. 114). The *Evolution* dissertation adds organisational detail: Chentouf formed the first clandestine PPA women's cell after May 1945; by late 1946 there were five feminine cells in Algiers (small membership), and these cells formed the backbone of AFMA, which lasted until 1954 and focused on building women's political awareness more than explicitly "feminist" demands (Keswani, 2002, p. 80). Hence, women's agency begins to acquire concrete substance: Algerian women's organising was not only a top-down mobilisation mediated by male parties, but also a set of practical infrastructures—cells, meetings, welfare initiatives, and political education—that enabled women to build networks and operational skills later mobilised during the revolution. Even where associational life remained numerically limited, this post-1945 militancy politicised a cohort of young women who would subsequently become central to wartime mobilisation (MacMaster, 2009, p. 57). Across these strands, the late-colonial political field produced a persistent double bind: women were

increasingly recognised as indispensable to national regeneration and political mobilisation, yet they were simultaneously treated as the boundary of communal identity—precisely the domain through which colonial authorities and Algerian movements fought over the meaning of citizenship. Interwar debates staged tensions over education, moral reform, and changing norms of gender and generation within the family (McDougall, 2017, p. 146). Structural constraints, however, remained severe: by the late 1930s fewer than 5% of Algerian girls received any education, and girls' instruction was often reduced to domestic training, with free compulsory schooling for girls arriving only much later (ibidem). Late colonial "progress" for women was correspondingly limited; by 1954 female illiteracy remained extremely high (Keswani, 2002, p. 61). This limitation was not only social but also explicitly political. In formal terms, the 1947 Algerian statute stated that Muslim women enjoyed voting rights, but the concrete modalities for exercising that right were only defined in 1958, during the war—an exceptionally late and strategically defensive move rather than a stable pathway into citizenship (Guardi, 2014, pp. 102–103). This gap between nominal inclusion and practical exclusion reinforced a broader pattern inside Algerian opposition politics as well: both nationalist and communist currents tended to treat women's condition as inseparable from colonial domination and therefore not as a domain requiring specific political integration in the present. Women were often channelled into women's organisations with primarily social functions and remained largely excluded from core political arenas (Guardi, 2014, pp. 102–104). MacMaster's synthesis clarifies why, in this environment, women's organisations became politically significant beyond their numbers. First, they disclosed an ideological fracture that would later structure both the war and the postcolonial state: tensions between a minority attracted to a more secular emancipation agenda and those who accepted a nationalist struggle that embedded women in subordinate roles as mothers and guardians of the home (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 57–58). Second, women's organisations functioned as arenas of negotiation across ideological boundaries, allowing forms of dialogue and cross-current interaction during 1944–54 (MacMaster, 2009, p. 58). Third, the colonial state's refusal to implement meaningful reforms around franchise and equality reinforced the perception that women's citizenship could not be secured within colonial legality, feeding into the wider crisis that culminated in revolutionary rupture (MacMaster, 2009,

p. 36). In this sense, by 1954 Algerian women's agency had already acquired historical thickness. It existed not only as symbolic representation or rhetorical "instrumentalisation," but also as organised practice: communist-led social activism (UFA), discursive contestation within reformist press and youth milieus (UDMA/JUDMA), reformist schooling networks that politicised girls while circumscribing emancipation, and clandestine nationalist cells that trained women into the organisational grammar of anti-colonial mobilisation (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 36–47; Salhi, 2010, p. 114; Keswani, 2002, p. 80). At the same time, the terms of women's participation were already shaped by selectivity: even movements claiming modernisation could remain reluctant to challenge patriarchal order directly, postponing "the woman question" or framing it as a derivative issue to be resolved after liberation (Guardi, 2014, p. 103). These trajectories did not dissolve the structural constraints of patriarchy or colonial domination; they did, however, produce a cohort of women for whom political action and public presence were no longer unimaginable—and for whom "the woman question" was no longer something to be debated exclusively by colonial administrators, French feminists, or male nationalist elites.

2.3 Women's participation in the War of Independence and the struggle over gender meanings

To reconstruct the War of Independence from women's perspective also requires confronting a problem of historical visibility: despite the centrality of the revolution to state legitimacy, women often appear only marginally in the dominant post-independence narrative, or they appear through a figure shaped to the needs of male heroism and national mythmaking (Guardi, 2014). In this sense, the struggle is not only about participation but also about voice—about who is authorised to narrate the war and what counts as a legitimate form of revolutionary action. A significant shift in public discourse occurred only much later, as women's testimonies and memoirs began to circulate more widely from the late 1990s onward, particularly through renewed debates over torture and the naming of the conflict in France, which created openings for women survivors to speak publicly about repression, sexual violence, and the costs

of militancy (ibidem). Reading the war through women's narratives therefore means tracing both revolutionary agency and the long afterlife of silencing and selective commemoration.

2.3.1 The outbreak of war and the gendered struggle over legitimacy

The FLN's turn to armed insurrection on 1 November 1954 opened a conflict that was simultaneously military and symbolic: a struggle over sovereignty, but also over the social order through which sovereignty would be imagined and governed. From the first years of the war, women became a central stake in this contest—not because either side adopted women's emancipation as an autonomous objective, but because gender offered a powerful language through which to claim legitimacy, define "civilisation" versus "barbarism," and police the boundary between the private and the political. In this sense, the war intensified a dynamic already rooted in the colonial period: women's bodies, mobility, and family status were repeatedly treated as instruments through which the authority of competing projects could be displayed and verified (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 272–275).

2.3.1.1 Gender discourse on two fronts: French "emancipation" as counter-insurgency, FLN "authenticity" as boundary-making

On the French side, the war produced a renewed investment in the "woman question" as a weapon of counter-insurgency. French authorities framed reforms such as women's enfranchisement and family-law intervention not simply as rights, but as demonstrations—directed to international audiences and to Algerian society—that *Algérie française* could embody progress and modernity. The women's visibility was considered even more strategic by French authorities and military psychological-warfare networks at the very moment when the FLN was gaining ground politically and diplomatically (Perego, 2015, pp. 351–354). In terms of propaganda, A core mechanism was the production of visual evidence. French strategists fixated on the veil because it offered an immediately legible "before/after" symbol: removing a garment could be staged as instant proof of progress, at far lower political and

administrative cost than substantive reforms such as mass education (Perego, 2015, p. 361). The objective was not simply cultural persuasion, but a propaganda economy of images—photographs, posters, films, and choreographed events—meant to convince both Algerians and foreign observers that *Algérie française* embodied women's liberation (Perego, 2015, pp. 361–363). This instrumentalization was also explicit in the language used to ventriloquise women's desire. French propaganda captions repeatedly deployed the slogan "*Kif, kif les françaises!*" ("Let's be like French women!"), presenting Algerian women as secretly yearning to become modern "sisters" of metropolitan French women (Perego, 2015, p. 359). At the same time, French women's groups and military pamphlets provided step-by-step instructions on how to pressure women into unveiling incrementally—first lowering the *haïk* inside meetings, then going out unveiled in groups—explicitly framing veiling as "lack of confidence" and unveiling as a measurable marker of political conversion (Perego, 2015, p. 359). A second mechanism was spectacle, especially during and after May 1958. French psychological action intensified through public "unveiling" ceremonies in which the Fifth Bureau organised demonstrations and parades while army-linked structures (including EMSI and SAS) brought women into the public arena for cameras and journalists (Perego, 2015, p. 363). Perego emphasises that participation could reflect genuine adherence for some, but could also be coerced; the public act was often framed as spontaneous emancipation even when shaped by military and administrative pressure (Perego, 2015, p. 363). Perego reconstructs, for instance, the public unveiling of Monique Améziane in Constantine on 26 May 1958, presented in the media as spontaneous liberation yet framed and managed to generate photographs and narratives of female emancipation under French auspices (Perego, 2015, pp. 360–361). Keswani's account reinforces this as an explicitly psychological campaign "centred on Algiers," associated with prominent French women (including Mme Massu) and structured around "social activities" aimed at reorganising women's everyday practices and loyalties (Keswani, 2002, pp. 103–104). Even the language of rights could be activated within this wartime economy of proof. Guardi notes that although Muslim women were formally granted voting rights in the 1947 statute, concrete modalities enabling access were effectively implemented only in 1958—during the war—illustrating how political citizenship could be instrumentalised as a late colonial tactic aimed at showcasing

"integration" rather than consistently expanding autonomy (Guardi, 2014, pp. 102–103). On the FLN side, gender discourse operated through a different logic: not an open project of emancipation, but a politics of national authenticity and social cohesion in which women were often positioned as custodians of moral order and cultural continuity. Guardi captures this tension through revolutionary representations that acknowledged women's participation while translating it into categories compatible with dominant gender expectations. In early wartime narratives—especially from 1957 onward—women were publicly recognisable as participants, yet the roles through which they were made legible (nurse, liaison agent, student, *moussebila*) implicitly encoded a hierarchy between "combat" and "support," and between political subjecthood and socially authorised femininity (Guardi, 2014, pp. 106–107). The result was not simply exclusion, but a form of gendered incorporation: women were brought into the national cause, yet often under terms that disciplined the meaning of their presence. This is also confirmed by Vince, when she shows that women were frequently cast through polarised templates—heroine, victim, or "deviant"—in which sexuality and honour became central objects of public storytelling. In the French and international "war of words," women could appear either as politically conscious militants using their bodies strategically, or as pure victims whose violated honour proved colonial barbarity (Vince, 2015, p. 85). These frames elevated women, but also contained them by tethering political legitimacy to purity, suffering, and family-coded identities. But also women's voice could be mobilised as propaganda under nationalist terms. Zohra Drif offers a concrete illustration of how women's militancy could be affirmed as legitimate while still being narrated through a nationalist moral grammar. Writing her *La Mort de mes frères* (The death of my brothers) from prison in 1961, Drif presented women's participation in the anti-colonial struggle as self-evident and socially "natural," grounding it in the everyday experience of colonial violence: in her account, women's politicisation followed from witnessing the torture and killing of male relatives and from the pervasive threat of sexual violence, including rapes committed under armed coercion in the Casbah and elsewhere (ibidem). Yet, as Vince notes, this framing—while powerfully accusatory toward the colonial regime—also reproduces classic nationalist stereotypes: women's engagement is explained primarily through relational identities (as sisters, wives, and mothers), their political agency is anchored in

the status of victims of death, violence, and rape, and their entry into struggle is narrated as part of a broader effort to restore a masculinity rendered powerless by colonial domination (ibidem). In this sense, Drif's text simultaneously asserts women's centrality to the revolution and reveals the terms on which that centrality was made publicly intelligible—through a moralised discourse in which women's suffering and familial roles become a key vehicle for nationalist legitimacy rather than a direct platform for equal political subjecthood (Vince, 2015, pp. 83–86).

2.3.1.2 The three Djamilas' case

To see how these two competing gender discourses operated in practice it is useful to look at the public construction of the "three Djamilas" — Djamila Bouhired, Djamila Bouazza, and Djamila Boupacha — whose cases became a privileged arena in which French propaganda and nationalist counter-narratives fought over the meaning of women's militancy (ibidem). Vince shows that once these women became visible through arrest, trials, and the circulation of their stories across Algeria, France, and transnational solidarity networks, their biographies were rapidly converted into a contested narrative battlefield (Vince, 2015, pp. 83–86). On the French side, the "Djamila" figure could be moralised and depoliticised—presented as deviant, manipulated, or exceptional—in ways that implicitly reaffirmed the colonial claim to order and civilisation (ibidem). Yet French narratives also became unstable once torture entered public debate: the very same cases could trigger scandal and humanitarian outrage, exposing the gap between the rhetoric of colonial "emancipation" and the reality of coercion and repression (ibidem). Within pro-FLN discourse, these women were elevated as emblematic heroines and as proof of colonial illegitimacy, but the terms of recognition were often moralised: youth, innocence, sexual honour, and the idiom of violated purity structured how outrage was articulated and how nationalist legitimacy was claimed (ibidem). In this way, the "three Djamilas" capture the core logic of gender instrumentalisation on the nationalist side: women's militancy is made politically powerful, yet it becomes publicly intelligible through a respectability-based moral economy that both amplifies women's visibility and narrows the space for women to appear as autonomous political subjects (ibidem).

2.4 Beyond the combatant/helper binary: repertoires of agency across space, class, coercion, and narrative recognition

The core analytical problem when talking about Algerian women's participation is that it was simultaneously operationally indispensable and unevenly recognized, both during the conflict and in its afterlife. Lazreg's corrective is methodological as much as historical: even the basic question of *how many* women participated is structured by gendered barriers of certification, literacy, and bureaucratic access, which systematically disadvantage rural women and produce invisibility as an institutional outcome rather than a mere cultural silence (Lazreg, 2018, p. 113). Specifically, the official figure circulated by the Ministry of War Veterans—10,949 women—cannot be treated as a transparent indicator of participation. Lazreg attributes the discrepancy not simply to poor record-keeping but to the certification procedure itself, which required written testimony and access to administrative offices—conditions that systematically disadvantaged illiterate rural women. The official count also excludes additional categories, including women and men whose deaths were never recorded and those who never applied for certification (ibidem). This matters because the most visible figures in archives and media are not necessarily representative of the broader social geography of women's involvement. Guardi's data point converges with this: although official recognition later registered women as a small minority of combatants, the profile of those recognized was predominantly rural, reinforcing the need to treat rural participation as central rather than marginal (Guardi, 2014, p. 109). Therefore, women's "absence" is not only cultural or narrative; it is also institutionally produced by the bureaucratic filters through which wartime contribution becomes legible to the state. To avoid collapsing this diversity into the misleading combatant/helper binary, it is useful to treat "agency" as a set of repertoires—forms of action shaped by space, coercion, class, and moral regulation. A workable typology emerges by combining Lazreg's three arenas of involvement (urban cells, maquis, and rural "drawn-in" zones) with Sajed's emphasis on the *politics of admittance*—the idea that nationalist memory incorporates women as symbols of unity while restricting their political subjecthood (Sajed, 2023,pg. 128-137). Within this frame, the point is not to rank women's roles, but to map how different practices became possible, risky, meaningful, or narratable under

wartime conditions.

(1) Urban guerrilla militants — *fidaiyates* and the tactical use of visibility

In the urban theatre, women's agency often operated through mobility, concealment, and the exploitation of colonial surveillance assumptions. Keswani defines *fidayate* as "civilian women" engaged in clandestine FLN urban action, especially bombings operations in the predominantly European quarters, which were taking advantage of the initial unsuspectedness of such women at the eyes of French forces — for their "apparent submissive and self-effacing demeanour" — a misconception that has been exploited for carrying messages, weapons, and bombs through checkpoints and across the city (Keswani, 2002, p. 96) . Because of the high-risk nature of this work, many fidaiyates were arrested and imprisoned—Keswani reports 50.8% arrested and notes that 37% received prison sentences of three years or more—while others were killed or injured by defective bombs detonating prematurely (Horne, 1977, p. 91, as cited in Keswani, 2002, p. 96). As Lazreg emphasizes, these urban women were generally drawn from the French-educated middle class, although other classes were represented; the women who became famous through trials and international campaigns were often lycée educated, but many others were employed as clerical workers, nurses, or accountants, or were housewives and unemployed young women whose entry depended on family circumstances, chance, or recruitment by the FLN (Lazreg, 2018, p. 113). A striking feature of urban guerrilla warfare, she adds, was its appeal to educated women born in the 1930s who seldom wore the veil and who had attended French schools or Franco-Arab *medersas* in major cities (Lazreg, 2018, p. 115). These women became publicly legible not only because of what they did, but because their mobility, education, and appearance were already positioned within the colonial optics of "modernity"—a condition that both enables tactical deployment and invites intensified moralisation. As Sajed notes, the *fidaiyate* becomes hypervisible in nationalist and international imagery, yet this very visibility can be moralized and narratively contained through tropes that convert political action into symbolic proof of the nation (Sajed, 2023, pg. 128-137).

(2) Maquisardes / moudjahidate — agency in the rural guerrilla space of the maquis.

A second repertoire of women's agency emerges in the rural guerrilla space of the

maquis, but it is best approached through a distinction between (a) the label "*moudjahidate*" and (b) the more specific position of "*maquisardes*." As Sajed notes, Algerian women are often admitted into nationalist historiography primarily as *moudjahidate*—heroic figures that validate the national narrative without necessarily disrupting patriarchal authority—and the term frequently operates as an umbrella category rather than a precise description of armed roles (Sajed, 2021, p. 132). This conceptual point matters because it prevents the analysis from equating recognition with combat: women's "fighter" status is often an effect of memory politics rather than a transparent indicator of what they did. Within that broader label, *maquisardes* can be treated as a more delimited subset: women who joined or worked in close proximity to ALN maquis units, where agency was exercised through endurance, secrecy, care, and the management of wartime life under constant threat. Keswani's account highlights both the intensity of maquis conditions (night marches, hunger, cold, scarcity) and the multiplicity of women's work—from improvised nursing in "maquis hospitals" with minimal resources to education and hygiene teaching among mountain populations (Keswani, 2002, pp. 93–94). At the same time, she shows how this repertoire was embedded in a strict moral regime: early recruitment often favoured widows/divorcees or women married to fighters because cohabitation with men had to be rendered "morally acceptable," and as recruitment widened, the conduct of men and women was closely monitored and sanctioned; FLN leaders even performed marriages without family consultation as an "exceptional" wartime measure to uphold respectability (Keswani, 2002, p. 94). Vince's rural testimonies complicate any celebratory reading of this space by showing that women's proximity to the maquis did not only "empower"; it also exposed them to coercion and violence from the French side (interrogation, torture, house destruction) while making their labour—cooking, washing, medicinal plants, and intelligence on troop movements—crucial to guerrilla survival (Vince, 2015, pp. 34, 61). In this sense, the maquis repertoire illustrates a central thesis claim: women's agency was real and operationally indispensable, yet it remained regulated through gendered moral discipline and later narrated through heroic-sacrificial frames that could simultaneously elevate women symbolically and limit their claims to autonomous political voice (Sajed, 2021, p. 132; Keswani, 2002, p. 94).

(3) Moussebilate / musabbilīn — civilian infrastructures of shelter, logistics, and liaison under coercion.

A third repertoire captures the civilian infrastructures that sustained insurgency, especially in rural areas where war was fought and where participation could be induced by geography rather than formal affiliation. Lazreg stresses that many rural women were drawn into the conflict by their location in strategic zones, often giving refuge or assistance to ALN members out of compassion or fear, and facing brutal retaliation; in her view, this rural "drawn-in" participation formed the majority of women involved (Lazreg, 2018, p. 113) . Vince similarly shows that rural support was frequently initiated through practical instructions—preparing food for fighters, providing routine services—and that these acts were not marginal but "crucial" to the survival of the rural maquis, including intelligence work such as reporting French troop movements; she also notes a gendered pattern whereby men often fled approaching soldiers while women remained to face interrogation (Vince, 2015, pp. 34, 61). The analytic point is that this repertoire should not be reduced to voluntarist "help": it represents agency under exposure and constraint, where concealment, provisioning, and information work become politically constitutive because they shape insurgent capacity and civilian survival. Lazreg extends the repertoire beyond direct support by detailing "infrastructural" agency: women managing farms or businesses when male relatives were absent, and searching for detainees across prisons and camps—forms of wartime governance that rarely enter heroic memory but structure who endures (Lazreg, 2018, p. 130). Finally, she insists that coercion was not one-directional: rural women could also be caught in nationalist competition and internecine violence, as illustrated by the 1956 episode in Melouza linked to conflict between the FLN and rival organisations (Lazreg, 2018, p. 113). Across these repertoires, participation reshaped women's lives in multiple registers: prison and torture forged solidarities that cut across class, ethnicity, and region; rural educational/paramedical work produced new senses of competence and responsibility; risky missions generated confidence and a sense of "history in the making"; and many women—indirectly drawn in through arrests—took over farms or businesses and navigated the prison–camp system in search of relatives, while maquis life also entailed unprecedented proximity to male strangers and care for wounded men. (Lazreg, 2018, p. 130)

2.5 From wartime participation to postwar containment: why "silencing" is structurally produced

Despite how the war expanded women's horizons of action, it did not automatically expand women's political citizenship. Lazreg explicitly cautions against retrospective claims that women's participation was "for nought" or that a feminist movement could have emerged as an alternative during wartime; given colonial manipulation of women as ideological stakes and the repression of indigenous associational life, feminist articulation was structurally constrained, and women's political voice remained trapped between colonial and nationalist instrumentalization (Lazreg, 2018, p. 131). She further notes that the FLN's limited responsiveness to women's concrete needs was reinforced by women's absence from leadership and by the FLN's monopolization of opposition, which foreclosed open debate on strategy while war was ongoing (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 131–132). The consequence is that women's participation could be indispensable and even publicly celebrated while still being politically "unclaimed" in institutional terms. Seen from this perspective, postwar "silencing" is not an abrupt betrayal after 1962; it is the continuation of a wartime logic of admittance. Women's entry into public life became memorable—so deeply that symbolic repertoires consolidated around a few iconic names and images—yet Lazreg argues that attempts after independence to erase or domesticate the memory of women's entry into Algerian public consciousness should be understood as reactions to the severity of the disruption itself (Lazreg, 2018, p. 130). This is precisely the tension your chapter has documented: women were mobilized as proof of national unity and modernity, yet their political subjecthood remained conditional, managed, and often retrenched through moral regulation and narrative containment. But even where postwar outcomes appear to confirm a narrative of nationalist appropriation, Lazreg warns against the "prevailing feminist view" that women were duped into participation by unscrupulous men, because it reproduces a derogatory logic that deprives women of will and misunderstands Algerian nationalism as inseparable from colonialism and decolonization (Lazreg, 2018, p. 112). Within that relational structure, women's participation emerges as a rational response to an otherwise coercive historical situation, preserving the meanings women themselves attached to action across urban operations, maquis life, and rural infrastructures

(ibidem). This is precisely why the analytical task is not to judge participation by its postwar "spoils," but to reconstruct the repertoires of agency and the institutional filters through which those repertoires were later remembered, moralized, or erased.

2.6 Conclusion to Chapter 2

Gender was never peripheral to Algeria's colonial trajectory: it was one of the principal terrains through which sovereignty, legitimacy, and social order were continuously negotiated from the conquest era to the War of Independence. French settler colonialism did not simply "encounter" a patriarchal society; it progressively reconfigured the conditions under which women could be visible, intelligible, and politically legible, turning the family into both an object of rule and a key justificatory language of domination (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 33–34; Keswani, 2002, pp. 62–63). In this framework, the "woman question" was not only rhetorical. It became embedded in the legal architecture of political membership: colonial distinctions between "French" status and full citizenship were mediated through personal status and family law, making gender relations part of sovereignty's institutional grammar (Vince, 2015, pp. 72–73). At the same time, the chapter has clarified why a precolonial baseline cannot be reduced to subordination alone. Pre-1830 Algeria exhibited differentiated sociopolitical modes—rural, southern, and urban–maritime—with varying gender relations shaped by kinship, local moral economies, and regional practice rather than a single homogeneous template (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 23–28). Within these structures, women's agency often operated through relational labour and everyday governance—household management, mediation across natal and affinal groups, and the reproduction of moral and reputational boundaries—forms of power that matter politically even when they remain socially delimited (Keswani, 2002, pp. 18, 57–58). Women's ritual and oral-cultural gatherings likewise functioned as "infrastructures" of cohesion and meaning-making rather than mere folklore, underscoring why a women-centred approach must avoid equating agency with overt confrontation (Slyomovics, 2014, pp. 145–168). Colonial conquest and "pacification" then transformed these conditions of life through displacement, coercion, and the reorganisation of land and labour. The early decades of

conquest were marked by exceptional brutality and deep social disruption, which exposed women not only to the violence of military operations but also to gendered vulnerabilities and humiliations specific to occupation (Lazreg, 2018, p. 41; McDougall, 2017, pp. 56–58). Over time, the nineteenth century consolidated what Lazreg describes as a historically produced invisibility: veiling and seclusion hardened in political meaning as protective responses to an invasive colonial gaze, while the widening asymmetry between male access to colonial circuits (schooling, commerce) and women's structural exclusion deepened the gendered gap in public presence and institutional voice (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 53, 58). These processes also enabled coercive sexual economies and policing regimes that made women's bodies and reputations practical terrains of governance—demonstrating that "the woman question" was enacted through everyday administration as much as through ideology (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 55–58; Keswani, 2002, p. 30). The late-colonial period sharpened the contradiction between women's symbolic centrality and their restricted political subjecthood. As reformism and nationalism expanded, political mobilisation increasingly adopted the idioms of rights and citizenship, yet the gendered boundary of citizenship remained intact: girls' schooling was severely limited, often domesticating in orientation, and women's access to political membership was repeatedly deferred or hollowed out in practice (McDougall, 2017, p. 146; Keswani, 2002, pp. 61–63). In comparative perspective, Algeria's women's organisational emergence was unusually late and constrained, especially when contrasted with earlier institutionalisation and transregional circulation of feminist agendas in parts of the Mashreq (e.g., Egypt's EFU and interwar congress circuits) (Quawas, 2006; Weber, 2008; Libal, 2008; Institute for Palestine Studies, 1938). Even within the Maghreb, trajectories were uneven: Tunisia saw significant associational milestones by the mid-1930s (Bakalti, 1996), and specific figures could intersect transregional networks (Kallander, 2021), while Moroccan organisational beginnings are frequently dated to the mid-1940s (Sadiqi, 2008, pp. 133–151; Glacier, 2012). Algeria, by contrast, remained especially isolated and policed—conditions that help explain why Algerian women appeared largely absent from major interwar congress circuits (MacMaster, 2009, p. 30). Within this constrained environment, the decade 1944–1954 becomes the crucial breakthrough in which Algerian women begin to organise in multiple political currents rather than a single

movement, each linked to late-colonial party ecologies and reformist networks (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 38–47, 58). Communist-led mobilisation through the UFA developed repertoires of petitions, meetings, demonstrations, and social claims-making, functioning as an infrastructure of politicisation even while remaining socially divided and contested (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 36, 38–39; Salhi, 2010, p. 114). Liberal-reformist milieus around UDMA/JUDMA opened a space for discursive struggle—women writing, debating, and contesting forced marriage, repudiation, seclusion, and the veil—while facing backlash that revealed the gendered limits of public presence (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 40–41). Reformist schooling networks could politicise girls and widen partial access to public life, yet often legitimised women's education primarily as a tool of moral regulation and Arabo-Islamic renaissance rather than as equality or citizenship (MacMaster, 2009, pp. 45–47). Finally, nationalist clandestine cells and the AFMA built organisational capacities through welfare work and political consciousness-raising, forming practical infrastructures that would later feed wartime mobilisation (Keswani, 2002, p. 80; Salhi, 2010, p. 114; MacMaster, 2009, p. 57). Across these strands, the same double bind persisted: women were increasingly treated as indispensable to national regeneration, yet their political subjecthood remained circumscribed, mediated, and frequently postponed (Guardi, 2014, pp. 102–104; Keswani, 2002, p. 73). The War of Independence intensified this politicisation of gender while deepening the struggle over its meaning. French "emancipation" functioned as a repertoire of counter-insurgency legitimacy, relying heavily on staged visibility—especially the propaganda economy of unveiling and the production of images that claimed instantaneous proof of "progress"—and on wartime reforms deployed as demonstrations rather than stable rights pathways (Perego, 2015, pp. 359–363; Guardi, 2014, pp. 102–103; Keswani, 2002, pp. 103–104). On the nationalist side, women's participation became operationally indispensable yet frequently narrated through moralised templates of honour, sacrifice, and family-coded virtue that could elevate women symbolically while delimiting their claims to autonomous political voice (Vince, 2015, pp. 83–86; Guardi, 2014, pp. 106–107). Reading women's wartime participation through repertoires rather than binaries clarifies both the diversity of women's action and the filters of recognition that shaped what could be publicly named: the institutional politics of certification and bureaucratic legibility, as well as the moral

economy that governs narratability, systematically structure visibility (Lazreg, 2018, p. 113; Sajed, 2021, p. 132; Sajed, 2023, pp. 128–137).
The Chapter explains how colonial rule and wartime mobilisation politicised women without granting them stable citizenship, producing a structural pattern in which women could be central to legitimacy while remaining vulnerable to containment (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 33–34, 130–132; Sajed, 2021, p. 132). The transition to independence did not automatically dissolve this gendered logic of sovereignty; instead, it created the conditions for a postcolonial state to convert women's revolutionary contribution into moral capital while regulating women's autonomy through party mediation, bureaucratic recognition, and nationalist narrative templates (Sajed, 2021, p. 132; Lazreg, 2018, pp. 130–132). Chapter 3 therefore begins from this inherited architecture: women's participation has already been made foundational to the national story, but the political struggle now turns to how women's claims are "managed" inside the revolutionary state, how legitimacy is stabilised through controlled channels of participation, and how equality can exist as vocabulary while enforceability and autonomous representation remain structurally constrained—a trajectory that will become even more consequential as Algeria enters the post-1970s legitimacy crises that precede the transformations of the late 1980s and the violent escalation of the 1990s (Keswani, 2002, pp. 161–167; Lazreg, 2018, pp. 130–132).

Chapter 3 — Post-Independence and the 1984 Family Code

3.1 Ben Bella's regime (1963-1965)

3.1.1The end of the war and Ben Bella's installation

The Accords d'Évian (March 1962) marked the beginning of a ceasefire and the beginning of the process of national self-determination. However, the transition to sovereignty was quickly thrown off course by divisions within the nationalist movement. After independence was obtained in early July 1962, political rivalry quickly turned into open conflict as Ben Bella established his base at Tlemcen and advocated for a different leadership structure (a Political Bureau meant to replace the GPRA). Meanwhile, the battle in Algiers was a reflection of the larger conflict between the interior maquisards and the Ben Bella–Boumediene alliance, whose outcome allowed the winning coalition to turn a front during the war into the center of the post-independence state (Vince, 2015, pp. 105–106). Although Algeria was officially independent, Keswani points out that parliamentary elections were held only in August 1962, and on September 25, 1962, the newly elected National Assembly approved Ben Bella's government. In 1963, Ben Bella formally assumed the presidency through a referendum on a new Constitution, but he also had to deal with the massive administrative and economic void left by the destruction of the war and the mass exodus of French settlers and qualified personnel (Keswani, 2002, p. 135). Therefore, independence came amid a period of severe social unrest and economic stagnation. The sudden departure of approximately 900,000 French settlers in 1961–1962, who had held a significant number of managerial, technical, and administrative positions, added to the war's demographic toll, which was estimated to be around 1.5 million dead. Their departure caused a severe lack of qualified workers and rendered entire sectors (industry, services, and particularly agriculture) incapable of operating normally (Keswani, 2002, p. 120). A significant amount of output had previously been focused on the settler market, so the shock was both structural and financial: settlers withdrew bank savings, and general economic activity shrank precipitously (ibidem). Therefore, independence came amid a period of severe social unrest and economic stagnation. The sudden departure of approximately 900,000

French settlers in 1961–1962, who had held a significant number of managerial, technical, and administrative positions, added to the war's demographic toll, which was estimated to be around 1.5 million dead. Their departure caused a severe lack of qualified workers and rendered entire sectors (industry, services, and particularly agriculture) incapable of operating normally (ibidem). A significant amount of output had previously been focused on the settler market, so the shock was both structural and financial: settlers withdrew bank savings, and general economic activity shrank precipitously (ibidem). Yet this postwar emergency was not only material: it also intensified a symbolic struggle over *who the new Algeria was meant to be*. In the early independence moment, debates framed as "who are we?" often functioned as disputes over "who do we want to be"—a contest between projects of authenticity and modernisation, commonly articulated through binaries (Islamic/foreign, authentic/imitative) and translated into everyday cultural politics (Vince, 2015, pp. 146–147). Under these conditions, social reconstruction and ideological consolidation became deeply entangled: material scarcity and administrative breakdown heightened pressure to define a coherent national "personality," while the very idioms of recovery—socialism, cultural renaissance, Arabisation, Islam—were contested as markers of legitimacy in the postcolonial order (Vince, 2015, pp. 146–147). These macro-level dislocations also carried sharply gendered consequences. As family livelihoods fragmented and unemployment soared, women were often pushed into intensified unpaid reproductive labour—managing food, water, care work, and household survival amid shortages—while simultaneously facing tighter constraints on mobility and visibility in public space as "authenticity" debates increasingly policed women's comportment as a sign of national morality (Keswani, 2002, p. 120; Vince, 2015, pp. 146–147). In practical terms, the same crisis that made women's labour indispensable also made their social roles more tightly scripted: women's participation was frequently invoked as necessary for national reconstruction, but largely through familial and sacrificial registers rather than as a basis for equal citizenship and enforceable rights (Keswani, 2002, p. 120; Vince, 2015, pp. 146–147).

3.1.2 Algerian women in the new order

In Lazreg's terms, Algeria emerged from independence with the stark revelation that wartime declarations were largely ideological rather than programmatic, and women—lacking autonomous political organisation—entered the new order with little leverage beyond symbolic recognition of their wartime contribution: "they could rely only on leaders' memories of their contribution to independence" for the promotion of rights and needs (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 135–136). This structural weakness mattered because it intersected with a broader state-building discourse that prioritised cohesion, production, and institutional construction while treating gender hierarchy as either residual tradition or a "special" problem external to the core political economy. The Constitution was adopted by the National Assembly on 28 August 1963 and approved by referendum on 8 September 1963, explicitly grounding the new state's objectives in the Tripoli Programme and reaffirming the principle of a socialist economy and agrarian reform (Keswani, 2002, p. 121). Yet this new constitutional settlement did not translate women's wartime mobilisation into a clearly articulated framework of gender-equal citizenship. As Lazreg notes, independence "seemed as if it caught Algerian leaders by surprise," and the ensuing power struggle within the FLN revealed "the lack of a political and economic program tailored to the historically specific Algerian situation" (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 135–136). For women, this disconnect was consequential: lacking autonomous organisation as a political constituency, they remained structurally dependent on elite remembrance of their wartime contribution for recognition of rights and needs (ibidem). This problem was even more visible in the regime's flagship ideological statement, the *Charter of Algiers* (1964), which formally acknowledged women's participation and affirmed a general commitment to equality, yet did so through vague proclamations that failed to treat women as a strategic constituency within socialist state-building (ibidem). The document's ideological abstraction—its preference for categories such as industrialisation and self-management—left little conceptual space for naming gendered subordination as a distinct axis of exploitation requiring targeted institutional remedies (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 138–139). Even where women appeared, they tended to be framed as a "special" issue

inherited from “history,” implicitly positioned outside the core mechanics of socialist transformation (ibidem). In this sense, early post-independence governance combined ambitious state-making claims with a social vision in which women’s emancipation could be invoked rhetorically while remaining politically under-specified and institutionally deferred (Keswani, 2002, pp. 121–123; Lazreg, 1994, pp. 138–139). A concrete illustration of this gendered logic of early state-building emerged in 1963, when Ben Bella called on women to donate their jewellery to the National Bank as a patriotic contribution to the new state’s financial consolidation—an episode that Vince recounts as a performative, highly public act of mobilisation in the fragile post-independence moment, with women visibly positioned as guarantors of national recovery through personal sacrifice (Vince, 2015, pp. 165–166). Lazreg likewise emphasises both the scale and the political meaning of participation, noting that women responded “in great numbers,” and framing the event as “significant in the history of relations between women and the state,” precisely because it consolidated a pattern whereby women were treated as necessary to building the state “as contributors, not participants” (Lazreg, 1994, p. 139). Read together, the two accounts point to the same structural implication: women’s public incorporation was most legible—and most valued—when channelled through sacrificial nation-building, rather than through institutionalised political agency and enforceable rights (Vince, 2015, pp. 165–166; Lazreg, 1994, p. 139).

3.1.3 The UNFA and the institutionalisation of women’s “participation”

In organisational terms, the early post-independence period institutionalised women’s “participation” through a party-state channel rather than through autonomous mobilisation (Knauss, 1992, pp. 151–169). As Bouatta writes, “On the eve of independence, Algerian feminism was non-existent,” and the FLN rapidly structured society through a set of mass organisations—UGTA, UNPA, UNJA—and, for women, the UNFA — *Union Nationale des FemmesAlgériennes*, or *National Union of Algerian Women* — “the only officially recognized women’s organization,” created in 1963 with objectives framed around emancipation, participation in political life for national

construction, and social protection (Bouatta, 1997, p. 3). Yet, this institutionalisation simultaneously narrowed women's agency: the UNFA is described less as a representative arena for women's interests than as a relay of party directives, with conferences and congresses "chaired by the men of the FLN," and a dominant discourse that delegitimised rights-based debate by recoding it as "capitalist" individualism—explicitly asserting that women "acquire" rights through "sacrifices and struggles," while rejecting discussion of divorce, marriage, or political participation as lacking "social dimension" (Bouatta, 1997, p. 3). Vince's reconstruction of the UNFA's early trajectory sharpens this point by situating the organisation inside the FLN's wider "mass organisation apparatus," as its "newest," "least organised," "least influential" and "least autonomous" branch (Vince, 2015, p. 160). Even its institutional birth was unstable: a "Union des Femmes Algériennes" (UFA) was first mentioned in October 1962; its statutes appeared in *Alger républicain* in November 1962; and after a two-day founding congress in January 1963 it became the UNFA—its name change reflecting, among other things, the political sensitivity of the UFA acronym (Vince, 2015, p. 160). Leadership then remained fluid, with recurring "first congresses" and shifting public "heads" of the organisation, including former UFMA figures and well-known veterans such as Djamila Bouhired (as honorary president) and National Assembly deputy Samia Salah Bey (Vince, 2015, p. 160). In practice, moreover, the organisation's everyday repertoire tended to resemble charitable and civic "good works" more than a rights-advocacy agenda: fundraising, collective circumcisions for martyrs' children, Eid gifts to hospitalised children, housekeeping and sewing workshops, "Keep Algiers Tidy" cleaning sessions, and some literacy campaigns (Vince, 2015, p. 161). Alongside this, a major visible function was diplomatic representation—meeting foreign delegations and travelling abroad on official visits, a pattern that even generated internal scepticism among readers of *El Djazaïria* about performative airport ceremonies and elite visibility (Vince, 2015, p. 161). Read against Lazreg's foundational diagnosis—that women entered independence without autonomous organisation and thus "could rely only on leaders' memories of their contribution to independence" (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 135–136)—the UNFA appears as a substitute for independent feminist capacity rather than its institutional expression. And crucially, this was not simply an "external" critique: Vince notes that open criticism of the UNFA could emerge from within the

single-party system itself, including an FLN Central Committee member describing it as "inefficient and inoperative," and Boumediene's 1966 Women's Day speech stating that it had "played no role since independence" and could not be effective unless it extended to the countryside; indeed, rural women interviewed by Vince had often not even heard of the UNFA (Vince, 2015, p. 162). Taken together, these accounts frame the UNFA not as evidence of women's institutional empowerment per se, but as an early architecture of *contained mobilisation*—highly legible to the party-state, comparatively weak as an autonomous vehicle of claims-making—which helps explain why, in the following section, pressures for women's agency *outside* the UNFA would emerge as soon as political openings and contested legislation (above all the Family Code) made the limits of party-mediated representation impossible to ignore.

3.1.4 Rhetoric without reform: the gendered limits of Ben Bella's presidency

Ben Bella's presidency produced a striking gap between rhetorical elevation and institutional delivery. As Keswani concludes, "for the majority of women very little changed": although the government publicly encouraged women's participation, it launched no significant reform programme capable of integrating women into political and economic structures on equal terms (Keswani, 2002, p. 142). This contradiction was rooted in the immediate postcolonial legitimacy problem: reconfiguring women's role would have signalled a rapid transition toward a "modern" state and thus appeared as "Westernising" the nation, something Ben Bella—precisely as the first president of independent Algeria—could not easily afford while seeking to distance his regime from French influence (ibidem). Consequently, women's "emancipation" was framed primarily as instrumental to development and socialist construction, with participation demanded as a civic duty grounded in women's demographic weight and family roles, rather than as an entitlement flowing from equal citizenship and enforceable rights (Keswani, 2002, pp. 142–143). Even when the FLN's *Charter of Algiers* (1964) insisted that women should participate politically by militating in the Party and national organisations, and even when Ben Bella declared women's liberation a prerequisite for socialism, the regime largely failed to translate this language into concrete political

inclusion: women were discouraged from joining the FLN, frequently deemed insufficiently "politically educated" (a standard not applied equivalently to men), and those who attempted to enter public debate were silenced in the name of national unity (ibidem). Economic participation was similarly encouraged less as a response to women's aspirations than as a functional requirement of nation-building, with few corresponding protections or concessions (Keswani, 2002, p. 143). In this climate—intensified by pressure from conservative religious actors and the regime's drift toward a more explicitly "Muslim socialism"—women's rights became increasingly contentious, and by 1965 Ben Bella had effectively retreated from confrontation on the issue (Keswani, 2002, pp. 144–146). In Lazreg's terms, this was consistent with a broader early-state logic in which women were mobilised for the nation through sacrifice—rather than incorporated as political subjects whose duties were matched by rights—an asymmetry already visible in the 1963 jewellery campaign that both Lazreg and Vince treat as emblematic of women's incorporation as contributors, not participants (Lazreg, 1994, p. 139; Vince, 2015, pp. 165–166). Seen this way, the turn to a single, state-recognised women's organisation in 1963—rather than plural, autonomous mobilisation—appears less as a delayed "feminist opening" than as the institutional mechanism through which the one-party order would manage women's participation while keeping agenda-setting power firmly outside women's hands (Keswani, 2002, pp. 142–143).

3.2.1 Coup, crisis governance, and the re-authoritarianisation of revolutionary rule (1965–early 1970s)

Ahmed Ben Bella's overthrow in June 1965 marked a decisive turn from the unstable pluralism of the immediate post-independence years toward a more disciplined, security-centred mode of rule under Boumediène—one that aimed to stabilise the revolutionary state by centralising authority, rationalising socialist development, and policing ideological cohesion (Lazreg, 1994, p. 136; Keswani, 2002, pp. 148–149). As Keswani notes, Boumediène did not enjoy unanimous support and therefore had to continuously manoeuvre among factions, governing through a logic of neutralisation

and consolidation that reflected the regime's initial fragility (Keswani, 2002, p. 148). This consolidation took place against acute socio-economic turbulence: in rural areas, self-managed farms were running into severe difficulties due to bureaucratic mismanagement, shortages of equipment and qualified labour, and weak coordination between agriculture and industry; the crisis was sufficiently intense that unpaid workers sometimes resorted to theft simply to survive (Keswani, 2002, p. 148). In cities, strikes and unrest over rising food prices signalled a collapse in public confidence and reinforced the regime's prioritisation of order and governability (Keswani, 2002, p. 148). Boumediène's political project thus combined an ambitious developmentalist agenda—heavy industry, control of strategic sectors, agrarian reform, expanded education, and continued Arabisation—with a legitimation strategy designed to anchor authority socially and territorially (Keswani, 2002, pp. 148–149). This programme was crafted to appeal simultaneously to the educated urban population attracted by secular-modernising elements and to conservative rural constituencies reassured by the persistence of traditional Islamic values (Keswani, 2002, p. 149). This "double address" helps explain why the regime could pursue modernisation in production and administration while treating gender reform—especially family law—as politically explosive symbolic terrain rather than a straightforward extension of socialist development (Keswani, 2002, pp. 149–154; MacMaster, 2007, p. 107).

3.2.2 "Islamic socialism," authenticity politics, and the narrowing of acceptable female participation

This consolidation opened a phase of freezing women's claims within a constrained repertoire of acceptable participation. As Lazreg frames the shift, Boumediène advanced a religiously inflected socialism—an "Islamic" version of socialism—precisely because it prioritised economic transformation without a concomitant transformation of social relations, including those between women and men: women and men remained understood as subject to an Islamic normative code (Lazreg, 1994, p. 136). In practice, this meant that women's participation could be praised and mobilised, but only if it remained legible as compatible with national "morals" and with the boundaries of

postcolonial authenticity. Keswani's evidence makes this discursive limit concrete. In 1965–1966, Boumediène publicly praised women's wartime role and affirmed their participation in national construction, but repeatedly coupled that promise with the imperative to "safeguard moral principles," explicitly rejecting "mimicry" and "exhibitionism" as threats to the proper meaning of women's participation (Keswani, 2002, p. 149). Even more directly, in his International Women's Day speech of 1966, Boumediène argued that women who "demand" rights are mistaken because the "question of women's rights" had already been resolved: Algerian women had acquired rights by participating in the war of liberation (Keswani, 2002, pp. 149–150). Analytically, this is not a mere rhetorical flourish: it functions as a delegitimising move that recodes rights-claims as unnecessary (even suspect), shifting women's political standing from *rights-bearing citizenship* toward *earned recognition* and ongoing duty. This framing dovetailed with a broader "identity question" that structured legitimacy after independence. Vince shows how debates over authenticity—Arab-Islamic belonging, decolonised morality, and the boundaries of "Westernisation"—became entangled with women's bodies and women's visibility in public space: women could be recruited into rebuilding the state while simultaneously being re-inscribed as symbolic markers of cultural boundaries and moral order (Vince, 2015, p. 122). In this environment, MacMaster's judgement is blunt: Ben Bella and Boumediène "sided with the more conservative forces," subordinating emancipation to the one-party state and excluding meaningful reform of patriarchal family structures (MacMaster, 2007, p. 107). The resulting contradiction is central to the period: women were repeatedly invoked as indispensable to development, yet autonomous rights-based claims could be reframed as socially divisive, culturally alien, or politically destabilising (Lazreg, 1994, p. 136; Vince, 2015, p. 122; MacMaster, 2007, p. 107).

3.2.3 The Family Code as a long politics of postponement and controlled "consensus"

The best way to see how "Islamic socialism" functioned as containment is to follow the regime's handling of family law. Rather than codifying a clear rights-based model, the

Boumediène state governed the private sphere through deferral, secrecy, and selective consultation, precisely because family relations were a core battlefield of authenticity politics (Keswani, 2002, pp. 150–154; MacMaster, 2007, pp. 102–103). Keswani documents repeated drafting efforts during Boumediène's presidency that never reached promulgation. In 1966, a draft Family Code circulated unofficially (later published by Fadela M'Rabet), and although it contained a few procedural elements framed as "progressive," its architecture remained strongly patriarchal: the husband as head of family, marital residence in his home, the requirement of guardian consent for women's marriage even at legal majority, polygyny, a duty of obedience, and an asymmetrical divorce regime that effectively preserved repudiation logics under judicial form (Keswani, 2002, pp. 150–151). The draft was abandoned, and Keswani interprets this abandonment as political calculation: even modest changes were unacceptable to traditionalist forces and were shelved to avoid internal conflict (Keswani, 2002, p. 151). This was not a single failure but a pattern. Another draft was discussed within UNFA-linked venues in the early 1970s; media reporting in 1972 suggested a project that would have limited polygyny, strengthened judicial control, and expanded women's practical capacities (e.g., work and bank accounts), yet it again stalled—reportedly because the regime feared compounding disruption while managing agrarian reform (Keswani, 2002, pp. 151–152). The 1973 symposium on family laws revealed the depth of ideological contestation: lawyers defended polygyny and unequal inheritance as "Arabo-Islamic values" and framed such norms as cultural heritage and even demographic-economic benefit, while women's representatives argued that social modernisation made these norms increasingly untenable (ibidem). Boumediène's own position in 1974 clarified the boundary: emancipation could not occur "to the detriment of social morals and traditions," and change should not be imposed by force; women were encouraged to act within institutional channels, effectively shifting responsibility onto women while preserving state non-commitment (Keswani, 2002, p. 153). This interpretation is reinforced by MacMaster, who emphasises the long pre-1984 "vacuum" in personal status legislation and the use of secretive committee drafting with limited plural participation, suggesting a one-party anxiety about destabilisation in precisely this domain (MacMaster, 2007, pp. 102–103). Lazreg, meanwhile, helps theorise why the state could endorse equality in principle while treating the family sphere as a

politically insulated site: women's subordination is framed as a "special" social problem rather than an axis of exploitation requiring enforceable institutional remedies (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 140–141). Taken together, the Family Code's repeated drafting and abandonment becomes legible as a regime strategy: preserve modernising authority in the economy while negotiating identity legitimacy through cautious, often conservative, management of gender relations (Keswani, 2002, pp. 150–154; Lazreg, 1994, p. 136; MacMaster, 2007, pp. 102–103).

3.2.4 Equality "on paper" and governance in practice: the 1976 Charter/Constitution, reproductive policy, and the limits of women's enforceable citizenship

The mid-1970s ideological–constitutional moment made Boumediène-era ambivalence toward gender equality especially visible: women's rights were increasingly *affirmed* in foundational texts, yet the state's governing practices continued to organise women's agency through family roles and moral boundaries rather than through enforceable citizenship. Lazreg argues that the 1976 National Charter acknowledged women's rights in principle—no longer merely conditional on wartime participation—while still construing women's subordination as a "special" social problem: harms could be named, but remedies were left vague, and responsibility was implicitly displaced onto women's self-correction rather than institutional enforcement (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 140–141). The 1976 Constitution sharpened anti-discrimination language and formal guarantees (including equality and the right to work), yet, in Lazreg's view, these proclamations did not automatically generate political access, implementation capacity, or accountability mechanisms able to translate principle into practice (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 141–142). Keswani's close reading of drafting and textual shifts reinforces this diagnosis by showing how potentially more "rights-bearing" vocabulary could be toned down across iterations: references to "liberation" and stronger rights guarantees were softened into the less binding idiom of "promotion" and "participation," while women continued to be framed primarily through familial functions (mother, wife) rather than as autonomous political agents (Keswani, 2002, pp. 161–167). In this sense, the state could constitutionalise equality while keeping the operational grammar of women's

social role anchored to domestic responsibility and the safeguarding of moral order (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 140–142; Keswani, 2002, pp. 161–167). A parallel logic appears in population policy, where "modernisation" operated through technocratic governance rather than through women's autonomy. Keswani shows that the regime recognised rapid demographic growth as a constraint on development and increasingly spoke of birth regulation in the language of national planning, yet delayed a meaningful programme and initially channelled provision through *Protection Maternelle et Infantile* centres—an institutional framing that emphasised maternal/child protection rather than women's reproductive self-determination (Keswani, 2002, pp. 154–156). Even after the programme's expansion from the mid-1970s, coverage remained low relative to the target population and was especially limited in rural areas, where need was often greatest (Keswani, 2002, pp. 159–160). Crucially, Keswani interprets this hesitation not only as administrative lag but as political boundary-setting: enabling women to control fertility would have required recognising them as more than procreators—as adult citizens with authority over their lives—precisely the kind of transformation the regime avoided while insisting that women's "evolution" remain compatible with "morals" and "traditions" (Keswani, 2002, pp. 159–160). Read together with Lazreg's broader diagnosis of Boumediène's project—modernising production and administration without transforming gender hierarchy, while preserving an Islamic normative code structuring women's agency through family and morality—population policy becomes another site where equality remained formally asserted but substantively contained (Lazreg, 1994, p. 136).

3.2.5 Contradictory legality and the everyday mechanics of male authority

Finally, Keswani provides concrete examples of how formal equality coexisted with discriminatory practice. A 1966 law imposed harsher adultery penalties on women than men, contradicting constitutional equality while reflecting entrenched gender norms around sexuality (Keswani, 2002, p. 168). In 1967, restrictions on Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men were reaffirmed, and electoral rules allowing men to vote on behalf of multiple women via proxy created institutional pathways for limiting women's

political participation in practice (Keswani, 2002, p. 169). The 1973 decision to repeal pre-independence legislation (effective 1975) and to leave judges discretion to apply Muslim law or local custom further expanded space for patriarchal adjudication in family matters, signalling a re-Islamising break with colonial residues that could be politically legible as authenticity while deepening women's vulnerability in the private sphere (ibidem). These examples ground MacMaster's claim that post-independence nationalism constrained independent emancipation by refusing to reform patriarchal family structures and by subordinating women's status to one-party identity management (MacMaster, 2007, p. 107; Keswani, 2002, pp. 168–169). In organisational terms, Boumediène-era consolidation reinforced a model of women's collective presence structured through officially sanctioned channels, which provided infrastructure for activities but also marked the boundaries of legitimate claims-making under the one-party system (Bouatta, 1997, pp. 3–4). The broader analytic implication is that, by the late 1970s, women's political agency confronted a double constraint: "formal equality without enforceability" and "participation without autonomous agenda-setting" (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 140–142; Bouatta, 1997, pp. 3–4). This is precisely the configuration that makes the next section structurally understandable: the regime's long avoidance of decisive family-law reform ensured that the private sphere remained the most symbolically charged site where citizenship, authenticity, and gender hierarchy would collide (Keswani, 2002, pp. 150–154; MacMaster, 2007, pp. 102–103; Bouatta, 1997, pp. 4–5).

3.3 Beyond party-mediated participation: autonomous women's activism, the Family Code, and the rise of Islamist opposition (late 1970s–1980s)

3.3.1 From "contained participation" to autonomous spaces of expression

By the late 1970s, Algerian women's collective action began to re-emerge *outside* — or at the margins of — official channels, not primarily through a ready-made feminist infrastructure, but through dispersed "micro-spaces" carved out under the one-party

order—cultural circles, student milieus, trade-union environments, and professional networks. Bouatta describes how, "under the shadow of the one-party system," some women sought "spaces of independent expression" through initiatives such as psychology students' working groups and cine-clubs, and—crucially—through the Oran workshops (early 1980) that brought together historians, economists, sociologists, and psychiatrists to reflect on Algerian women's condition; the proceedings were published and the organisers launched a women's journal, *ISIS* (Bouatta, 1997, p. 4). This pre-movement ecology matters clarifies how women's claims-making became possible in a restrictive political environment: not through open pluralism, but through semi-intellectual and semi-civic venues that could plausibly be framed as "cultural" or "social," while nevertheless creating the interpersonal networks, interpretive frames, and organisational skills later required for overt mobilisation (ibidem). In Bouatta's opinion, what ultimately "gave life to the women's movement"—and served as the spark for its objectives and strategies—was the convergence of these nascent spaces with a direct state attempt to legislate gender relations in the private sphere through a Family Code (ibidem).

3.3.2 Why the Family Code became the catalytic battleground

Across the first two post-independence decades, the Algerian state repeatedly asserted equality in "high" foundational texts while hesitating to legislate the family domain—precisely because it was politically explosive. MacMaster notes that Algeria did not seize independence to enact a new family code (unlike Tunisia or Morocco) and that a long "vacuum" persisted, culminating only with the 1984 code; during 1962–1984 there were multiple failed attempts to draft legislation, largely by *secretive committees with no female representation*, and the secrecy itself signalled one-party anxiety about destabilisation (MacMaster, 2007, pp. 102–103). Bouatta's work captures how this legislative trajectory became a trigger for mobilisation because it was experienced not merely as a conservative reform, but as "rule-making over women's lives without women"(Bouatta, 1997, p. 4). She stresses how women began organising "against the desire of the authorities to legislate" on men–women relations at the end of the 1970s,

in a context where the law's *content was suppressed* and public rumours circulated that a code based entirely on *Sharia* would reduce women to the "status of minor" (ibidem). The combination of secrecy, the sense of being deliberately excluded, and the perception of a major regression in women's legal personhood transformed what could have remained an elite legal debate into a broad contention about citizenship, voice, and the boundaries of "authenticity" (Bouatta, 1997, pp. 4–5).Keswani's framework keep help to explain, this battlefield was so structurally charged: under the post-independence socialist discourse, women's "participation" was frequently framed as duty-to-development rather than rights-bearing citizenship, and the unresolved contradiction between formal egalitarianism and gender hierarchy in a patriarchal social order remained politically combustible rather than institutionally addressed (Keswani, 2002, pp. 142–143). In that sense, the Family Code controversy did not come "out of nowhere"; it forced into the open a long-standing state strategy of postponement and ambiguity on gender equality—precisely where equality would require enforceable change.

3.3.3 Mobilisation sequences: demonstrations, veterans' leverage, and the "six points"

Bouatta provides a clear chronology showing how women's activism consolidated around concrete confrontations with the state's legislative process. In September 1981, the press announced that a Family Code project would be submitted to the National Assembly, but the text was still officially unknown; an unofficial copy circulated in women's circles, and women gathered in front of parliament to reject the adoption of laws "without a preliminary consultation of the most concerned," calling on the solidarity of *moudjahidates* and culminating in a street demonstration on 3 December 1981 (Bouatta, 1997, p. 4). The next organisational step was particularly important: on 21 January 1982, a large number of *moudjahidates* gathered and decided to address the president directly, articulating six demands—monogamy; unconditional right to work; equal division of common family property; same age of majority; identical divorce conditions; effective protection of abandoned children—which later became a core

platform for women's-rights militants (ibidem). Bouatta also notes the wider political constraints of the time: repression was strong and street demonstrations were "strictly forbidden", which makes the very fact of public protest a significant threshold-crossing in the late one-party period (Bouatta, 1997, p. 5). A complementary perspective comes from *Our Fighting Sisters*, which situates this mobilisation in a longer arc of periodic rumours and repeatedly denied drafts, and shows how female war veterans became pivotal political brokers. It notes that an announced but secret bill in 1979 was followed by the 1981 "personal status" bill grounded in a conservative interpretation of Muslim family law, and that lobbying by a small group of female deputies (including war veterans) plus a petition and demonstrations led by high-profile *mujahidat* helped ensure the project was put aside for a year (Vince, 2015, p. 198). The book's key conceptual contribution is that "*the mujahidat*" here operate not simply as a descriptive category (female veterans), but as a *politicised identity*—a feminist-nationalist genealogy through which women leveraged revolutionary legitimacy against postcolonial legal containment (ibidem).

3.3.4 What the Family Code *did* and why it mattered

Bouatta's text is explicit about the core provisions that made the 1984 Family Code a turning point in women's citizenship. She lists, among other elements, the requirement that a woman must have a guardian for marriage regardless of age/status, the permissibility of polygyny (up to four wives), a sharply asymmetrical divorce regime, the husband's dominance as head of family, and a duty of obedience imposed on the wife (Bouatta, 1997, p. 4). She further frames the Code as "anti-constitutional" in spirit: while constitutions and other legal domains affirmed equality, the family sphere was reorganised around domination, producing a juridical duality in which women could be "citizens" in constitutional-penal-labour terms yet "minors under masculine guardianship" in family law (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6). This diagnosis aligns with MacMaster's broader claim that the final 1984 law codified a patriarchal family order in which women were treated as "permanent minors," and that the long drafting history revealed a conservative shift (via leaked drafts) toward the core values of Maliki law

(MacMaster, 2007, pp. 102–103). It also converges with Vince's, which underscores the Code's legal institutionalisation of gender inequality—obliging obedience, entrenching repudiation/polygyny, and reducing women's grounds for divorce—while noting how official discourse celebrated it as part of "national construction" in an increasingly conservative climate (Vince, 2015, p. 198). As already seen and as Keswani emphasises, even earlier under Ben Bella, women's participation was repeatedly framed as instrumental to development and socialism rather than grounded in equal rights; when women sought to enter political debate, they were often silenced in the name of national unity, and by the mid-1960s the regime was already navigating strong pressure from conservative religious actors, making women's rights a costly terrain for confrontation (Keswani, 2002, pp. 142–146). Read forward, that political logic helps make sense of why family legislation became a locus for state "compromise" with conservative forces: it offered a high-symbolism arena in which the regime could signal cultural authenticity and social order without abandoning economic modernisation.

3.3.5 Islamist opposition and the "identity pledge" embedded in family legislation

Bouatta explicitly interprets the Family Code as revealing that the authorities had effectively made a "pledge" to Islamist integralists: although Algerian laws were often framed in universal/natural-rights terms, the Code's preamble and references were "exclusively religious," grounded in the Qur'an and tradition (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6). The political effect, she argues, was to transform contestation over women's legal status into a contest over religion's place in society—since disputing the Code could be reframed as an attack on the "constants" of Algerian identity and its "Islamicity" (ibidem). In this framing, the Family Code controversy crystallised two antagonistic social visions in which women became the principal "stake": supporters of the Code linked authenticity and identity to patriarchal religious order (treating deviation as *fitna,* defined by Bouatta as " dissension, rifts which might befall on the *owna*, which is the community of Muslims" and regression to *jahiliyya*, defined as " pre-Islamic period"), while women mobilising against it articulated their struggle in the language of equality, citizenship,

and democracy (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6). This constitutes a crucial bridge to the emergence of Islamist movements in the 1980s: as Bouatta explicitly notes that ideas presented as "reactionary" in earlier decades became precursors of Islamist positions later appropriated and politicised (Bouatta, 1997, p. 5). Lazreg strengthens this interpretation by explaining *why* such an identity-saturated compromise became politically "available" in the early 1980s. By the time the Code was passed in 1984, Islamist opposition had become increasingly assertive, and an armed Islamist current had already emerged: Lazreg notes that the *Mouvement Islamique Armé* (MIA), led by Mustapha Bouyali (a veteran of the anti-colonial war), went underground and took up arms against the state in 1982 while advocating the application of *shari'a* as a blueprint for reordering social and political life (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 142–143). In that climate, the Family Code reads less like a simple codification of "tradition" and more like a stabilisation instrument: the state, Lazreg argues, effectively bartered women's interests as equal citizens for an appeasement posture toward Islamist contention, vying with Islamists to uphold a presumed religious moral order and doing so "at the expense of women's rights" (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 142–143). Put differently, Bouatta's notion of an "identity pledge" acquires a sharper political logic in Lazreg's account: the Code was not only the persistence of patriarchal norms, but a strategically timed re-inscription of gender hierarchy designed to defend regime legitimacy under intensifying religious opposition (Bouatta, 1997, pp. 5–6; Lazreg, 1994, pp. 142–143).

3.4 Conclusion to Chapter 3

Chapter 3 has traced a central paradox of post-independence Algeria: women were repeatedly celebrated as symbols of the nation and mobilised as resources for state-building, yet they were not incorporated as autonomous political subjects with enforceable rights (MacMaster, 2007, p. 107; Lazreg, 1994, pp. 136–142). The early independence settlement under Ben Bella translated wartime participation into symbolic recognition and moralised calls to sacrifice, but left women structurally dependent on elite "memory" rather than institutional guarantees—an asymmetry visible in founding texts that articulated equality as principle while leaving family authority and gender

hierarchy largely untouched (MacMaster, 2007, p. 107; Lazreg, 1994, pp. 136–137). Under Houari Boumediène, this logic hardened. State consolidation and "Islamic socialism" modernised production and administration while preserving gender hierarchy as part of moral order, narrowing the acceptable repertoire of women's participation and displacing emancipation into questions of "mentalities" rather than binding reform (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 136, 140–142). Even where equality was codified "on paper" in the 1976 constitutional–charter moment, the regime's approach remained one of contained participation: women were addressed as mothers and wives first, citizens second, and their mobilisation was channelled through party-state structures that simultaneously enabled activity and supervised the boundaries of legitimate claims-making (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 140–142; Keswani, 2002, pp. 161–167; Bouatta, 1997, pp. 3–4).

Across these phases, the chapter has shown how the state's unresolved bargain between modernisation and "authenticity" repeatedly landed on women, turning gender into a privileged site where legitimacy anxieties were managed (Vince, 2015, p. 122; Lazreg, 1994, p. 136). The long postponement of family legislation—and then its eventual crystallisation in the 1984 Family Code—exposed the fault line between constitutional promises and lived citizenship, revealing how formal equality could coexist with a legal architecture that institutionalised hierarchy within the family (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 142–143; Bouatta, 1997, p. 6). As Chafia Bouatta argues, the Family Code did not merely regulate private life: it became the site where competing political projects fought over the definition of Algerian identity, allowing opponents of women's equality to reframe rights-based claims as assaults on the nation's "constants" and its "Islamicity" (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6). Lazreg's analysis clarifies why this arena became politically decisive: by the early 1980s Islamist contention was increasingly visible, including the emergence of armed mobilisation, and the state effectively bartered women's interests as equal citizens for an appeasement strategy that competed with Islamists over the guardianship of a presumed religious moral order (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 142–143). The result was a structural outcome that recurs throughout the chapter: women's inclusion was often instrumental, while gender equality was persistently deferred, moralised, or displaced (MacMaster, 2007, p. 107; Lazreg, 1994, pp. 140–143).
Yet the chapter also demonstrates that containment did not eliminate agency—it reshaped it. The battles around the Family Code marked a turning point because they

converted diffuse frustration into organised claims-making and revealed the limits of official women's representation within party-controlled structures (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 195–196; Bouatta, 1997, pp. 3–4). Even though mobilisation failed to prevent the Code's adoption, it produced a durable strategic shift: activists moved from informal networks and episodic protest toward the construction of associative infrastructures capable of contesting the state over time (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 195–196; Bouatta, 1997, pp. 7–9). In this sense, the emergence of rights-oriented associative initiatives in the mid-1980s—including the founding of Egalité in 1985—should be read as an initial marker of transition from an earlier politics of wartime legitimacy and party-mediated "participation" toward a more explicit politics of rights, law, and collective organisation (Lazreg, 1994, pp. 195–196; Bouatta, 1997, pp. 7–9). However, the detailed analysis of Egalité's trajectory and, more broadly, the organisational proliferation and differentiation of the women's movement belongs to Chapter 4, where the 1989 constitutional opening renders these associations legally intelligible and politically consequential within a newly pluralised—yet increasingly violent—public sphere (Bouatta, 1997, p. 7). If Chapter 3 has been about state-building and the containment of women's agency, Chapter 4 begins where that containment becomes historically unstable: the late-1980s crisis and the political opening associated with the 1989 Constitution, which formally expanded the space for plural associations and enabled women's mobilisation to become organisationally visible and legally intelligible (Bouatta, 1997, p. 7). At the same time, the next chapter will show that this opening unfolded alongside an accelerating conflict trajectory. The late-1980s economic and social rupture, the rise of Islamist movements, and the escalation of violence did not simply form a background to women's organising; they reshaped the stakes of feminist action—shifting struggles from legal reform alone to the intertwined questions of security, citizenship, public space, and survival (Bouatta, 1997, pp. 19–22; Lazreg, 1994, pp. 195–196). In other words, Chapter 4 will examine a decade in which the expansion of associational life and women's collective voice advanced, even as the country moved toward the breakdown that would culminate in civil war—making women simultaneously actors of democratisation and targets within a violently contested national order (Bouatta, 1997, pp. 19–22).

Chapter 4 - The 1989 Opening and Its Aftermath: The Black Decade, Terror, and Postwar "Normalisation"

The 1989 Constitution is often read as Algeria's "democratic opening," yet its aftermath shows how quickly pluralisation could convert into polarisation, and then into a conflict in which terror became a central mode of governing social space. This chapter traces that trajectory from the crisis-ridden 1980s to the constitutional shift of 1989, and then through the collapse of the transition into the Black Decade. It argues that these years were not only a struggle over institutions and sovereignty, but also a struggle over moral authority in which women's visibility, mobility, and legal status became key stakes—mobilised by competing projects and targeted by escalating coercion (Keswani, 2002, p. 257; Lazreg, 2018, pp. 216–217; Lloyd, 2006, pp. 457–458). At the same time, the chapter shows that women's political agency did not disappear under violence. The period consolidated an associational field that expanded before the war, adapted under terror through denunciation, documentation, mutual aid and care infrastructures, and then re-entered the post-1999 landscape shaped by state-led demobilisation and contested "normalisation" (Bouatta, 1997, pp. 6, 21; Salhi, 2017, pp. 28–30, 33–36; Lloyd, 1999, pp. 487–488).

4.1 The 1980s : Crisis, Legitimacy Erosion, and the prelude of autonomous women's organization

4.1.1 The Algerian 1980s: Economic Shock, Youth Blockage, and the Rise of Islamist Mediation

Across the 1980s, Chadli Bendjedid's reformism unfolded against a tightening "triangle" of economic shock, sociopolitical fragmentation, and escalating contention over the regime's legitimacy. While the leadership experimented with selective liberalisation and economic "restructuring" amid student unrest and recurrent labour action—including strikes linked to the UGTA and protests by unemployed graduates—the mid-decade downturn sharply narrowed the state's distributive capacity

(Keswani, 2002, pp. 225–226). The critical inflection point came with the December 1985 collapse of oil and gas prices, which, as Keswani notes, produced a sudden reduction in revenues and an economic crisis whose social effects were concentrated among the poorest: rising prices for basic commodities, shortages, and "high unemployment" (Keswani, 2002, p. 210). In this context, unemployment was not merely an economic indicator but a political-educational problem: the expanding cohorts of schooled youth—shaped by an Arabisation project that promised cultural authenticity and national integration—encountered a labour market that could no longer absorb them, intensifying the sense that the post-independence bargain of education-for-mobility had broken down and that the party-state anchored in the FLN had become socially unresponsive (Bouandel, 2003, pp. 7–8; Keswani, 2002, pp. 225–226, 210). At the same time, the decade's discontent was refracted through competing idioms of identity and moral order. The 1980 "Berber Spring" in Tizi Ouzou—triggered by the banning of a lecture by Mouloud Mammeri—signalled that Arabisation and cultural policy were not technocratic matters but fault lines of recognition and exclusion (Ouarem et al., 2025, p. 10). Yet the most politically scalable channel for popular grievance increasingly became Islamist mobilisation. Rather than treating Islamism as an exogenous "opposition," Sebastian N. shows how it grew through a cumulative interaction between societal frustration and regime strategy: the state sought to monopolise religious life while simultaneously making concessions that normalised Islamic discourse in public policy—most notably Arabisation in education, declaring Friday an official holiday, and codifying family relations through the 1984 Family Code—moves that unintentionally expanded the legitimacy of Islamic frames as vehicles for critique (Sebastian N., 2015, pp. 257–258). As redistributive capacity weakened and the state's secular-nationalist idiom lost persuasive force, Islamist networks—rooted in mosques and everyday moral communities—were increasingly able to translate diffuse social anger into a coherent indictment of regime corruption and moral bankruptcy (Sebastian N., 2015, p. 258; Bouandel, 2003, pp. 7–8). This helps explain why, as Malika Rahal notes, the October 1988 riots were quickly "overdetermined" by the question of how to resist Islamism: Islamist slogans became audible during the unrest and after-mosque mobilisation, revealing an organisational capacity that secular actors had underestimated (Rahal, 2017, pp. 4–6).

The uprising itself began in the working-class neighbourhood of Bab el-Oued and spread rapidly across Algiers and other cities; attacks on public buildings and state-owned stores were met with brutal repression—security forces ordered to fire on crowds—making October 1988 the decisive rupture that converted a legitimacy crisis into a constitutional one (Rahal, 2017, pp. 4–5; Keswani, 2002, p. 210). In Bouandel's reconstruction, the regime then seized October as an "opportunity" to relaunch controlled reform—via the 3 November 1988 plebiscite and the 23 February 1989 constitutional referendum—formally ending single-party monopoly while attempting to preserve the core balance of power (Bouandel, 2003, p. 8). This opening, however, immediately favoured Islamist mobilisation: by February 1989, Front Islamique du Salut was announced as a party project under Abbassi Madani and Ali Belhadj, and its internal tension between procedural electoral participation and a more explicitly anti-democratic conception of sovereignty foreshadowed the polarisation of the early 1990s (Rahal, 2017, p. 2; Sebastian N., 2015, pp. 260–261).As Salhi puts it, the October 1988 riots "heralded the awakening" of Arab societies against socioeconomic precarity, yet in Algeria—much as in later MENA uprisings—the momentum of popular revolt was quickly appropriated and reframed through Islamist mobilisation, with women's bodies and visibility becoming an early battlefield in the ensuing struggle over moral order and political legitimacy (Salhi, 2017, p. 16). In short, the 1980s crisis fused economic contraction with a blocked youth horizon and contested cultural policy, while Islamism increasingly provided the most effective moral-political language for converting social discontent into organised opposition—setting the stage for both the 1989 opening and the conflicts that would follow (Keswani, 2002, pp. 210, 225–226; Sebastian N., 2015, pp. 257–261; Rahal, 2017, pp. 4–6).

4.1.2 *Egalité* and the shift from "participation" to rights-based organisation

In the aftermath of the Family Code's promulgation, women's collective action reappeared not primarily as episodic protest but as an effort to build durable organisational capacity for sustained legal and political contestation. Bouatta underlines that, although mobilisation against the Code failed, activists read the post-1984 moment

as one of partial toleration, prompting a strategic shift in both the "form of their struggle" and their "structural framework": women moved from informal networks toward attempts at constituting a legal association (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6). Lazreg situates this organisational turn within a broader rupture of political trust: televised parliamentary debates and the state's dismissive handling of demonstrators impressed upon women the urgency of organising independently, while the FLN-controlled women's union failed to represent women's interests with the required force, thereby losing remaining legitimacy (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 195–196). Within this post-1984 rupture, a first organisational sequence unfolded in 1985. On 4 March 1985, a group of working women formed a provisional committee supporting equality and called for a rally in the Casbah at the site where Hassiba Ben Bouali died during the Battle of Algiers, using revolutionary memory to underscore women's centrality to national liberation (Lazreg, 2018, p. 196). On 16 May 1985, this impulse was translated into associational form when around forty women—"intellectuals, professionals and housewives"—founded the Association for Equality between Women and Men under the Law (Egalité) (ibidem). While Egalité framed its objective as pursuing measures of equality "stipulated in the Algerian constitution of 1976" (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6), its normative anchoring signalled a decisive rescaling of claims: rather than relying primarily on domestic ideological texts, it explicitly invoked the African Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, relocating the woman question into internationally recognised rights registers (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6; Lazreg, 2018, p. 196). Lazreg further shows how this rights-based repositioning was matched by practical organisational infrastructure and transnational linkages: Egalité drew support through members in Algeria and France, circulated a photocopied newsletter funded by membership dues, and articulated a programme including abolition of the Family Code, unconditional right to work, abolition of polygamy, and equality in divorce and common property (Lazreg, 1994, p. 196). Yet its capacity to claim legitimacy remained constrained by administrative gatekeeping. Bouatta notes that authorisation requests submitted from June 1985 onward received no response and that associational life remained governed by restrictive frameworks (including the 1987 law on associations) until the 1989 constitutional opening (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6). In this sense, Egalité illustrates how women's autonomous infrastructures were built in advance of, and in

tension with, formal liberalisation—making the 1989 Constitution not the origin of women's organising, but the threshold that rendered it legally intelligible in the new political arena (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6; Keswani, 2002, pp. 262–263).

4.1.3 The 1989 Constitution: Between Gendered Ambiguity and Associational Opportunity

Faced with widespread upheaval, the regime "turned a new chapter" by promulgating a new constitution adopted by referendum on **23 February 1989**, which introduced multiparty politics and abandoned constitutional socialism, ending 27 years of FLN monopoly (Keswani, 2002, p. 255). Bouatta similarly frames the referendum as a regime response after the repression subsided: the new constitution abolished one-party rule and opened the way for parties and associations, into which women "massively joined" (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6). Keswani is particularly useful for the gendered constitutional ambiguity of 1989. On the one hand, the constitution reaffirmed formal equality: Article 28 states that citizens are equal before the law without discrimination including on the basis of sex (Keswani, 2002, p. 257). On the other hand, Keswani emphasises that, unlike the 1976 constitution, the 1989 text removed the article that expressly reaffirmed women's rights, and indeed "all paragraphs specifically referring to women" disappeared; in the domain of work, for example, the text moved from encouraging women's participation in national development to a generic statement of citizens' right to work (Keswani, 2002, p. 257). She argues that this deletion is politically significant, especially given women's continued under-representation in economic and political life (Keswani, 2002, p. 257). This point dovetails closely with Lazreg's diagnosis that the post–Family Code rupture was rooted in women's recognition that constitutional promises could be overridden by political bargains with better-represented constituencies (Lazreg, 1994, p. 196). At the same time, the 1989 Constitution created a concrete organisational opportunity. Keswani notes that Article 40 recognises the right to create political associations, which transformed the political structure by enabling voices other than the FLN to organise; for women specifically, it provided the opportunity to create their own associations and express opinions

independently from the UNFA (Keswani, 2002, p. 257). Bouatta's account reinforces the magnitude of this associational opening by offering empirical indicators: she notes 20 women's associations at the first national meeting of women in late 1989 and references a UN-linked document identifying 24 associations, while acknowledging that exhaustive counting is difficult (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6).

4.2 Competing logics of women's participation after 1989: Islamist mobilisation and autonomous feminist proliferation

4.2.1 Women, the Front Islamique du Salut, and the gendered moralisation of politics

The constitutional opening created an arena in which Islamist actors could rapidly convert pre-existing mosque-centred networks into formal political mobilisation, and women's participation became one of the most visible sites where this transformation played out. Moghadam stresses that Islamist discourse did not treat gender as a secondary issue: it framed women's social role as fundamentally domestic and reproductive, and prominent Islamist figures—especially Ali Belhadj—advanced claims about women's "natural place" being the home, a position that alarmed feminists precisely because it sought to redefine citizenship through sex-differentiated sovereignty (Moghadam, 2001, p. 137). Yet, as Lazreg argues, the very centrality of women in Islamist rhetoric should not be confused with their inclusion as political subjects: the FIS's project of rebuilding the state along "Islamic" lines left little room for women as members of consultative bodies implementing *shura*, and women were largely absent from the authoritative sermon-debates that attempted to define their role under the shariʿa (Lazreg, 2018, p. 215). In Lazreg's reading, women constituted the most "visible" and ideologically manageable issue for the movement, in part because the "woman question" offered a clear arena for asserting moral authority, even as women remained marginal to institutional political deliberation (Lazreg, 2018, p. 215).

This ideological conservatism did not prevent women's mobilisation; rather, it shaped the terms on which women were incorporated. Moghadam reports a striking early

indicator: an April 1989 demonstration involving around 100,000 women mobilised in support of Islamism and sex segregation, which shocked anti-fundamentalist women while revealing the breadth of Islamist organisational reach among segments of the female population (Moghadam, 2001, p. 138). The ideological repertoire deployed toward women combined claims of voluntary piety with warnings against "Westernization": Moghadam cites FIS leaflets presenting hijab as a divine obligation and as freely chosen, insisting on women's primary identities as mothers, sisters, wives, or daughters, and depicting women's public visibility and sport as moral threats (Moghadam, 2001, pp. 138–139). At the level of organisation, Bouatta shows how Islamist mobilisation translated these claims into gendered infrastructures: women's sections and affiliated associations blended charity with religious instruction and daʿwa, expanding Qur'anic and Arabic teaching, organising women's "spare time" to prevent "moral deviations," and promoting shariʿa as social order—thus giving women a central role in community discipline while preserving a conservative division of gender roles (Bouatta, 1997, pp. 23–24). In parallel, Lazreg's account complicates any reading of veiling and "Islamisation" as purely ideological preference. She reports that in poor neighbourhoods of Algiers in 1991 young girls were persuaded by FIS members to adopt the hijab, sometimes supplied free of charge, suggesting that mobilisation could operate through social pressure and material facilitation rather than doctrinal conviction alone (Lazreg, 2018, p. 216). More broadly, Lazreg argues that "women were and continue to be the trope through which power struggles unfold," meaning that both Islamist and secular actors instrumentalised women's visibility as a marker of cultural integrity—Islamic or secular—within conflicts largely driven by rival male projects of authority (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 216–217). The escalation of violence during the crisis years reinforces this interpretation: Lazreg recounts a 1991 case in Ouargla in which a single mother and her children died in a fire allegedly linked to moral accusations, and she traces how, during the war, armed Islamist factions—most notoriously the Groupe Islamique Armé—targeted women for assassination or threats, including warnings to veil "or risk death," while secularist vigilante reprisals also policed women's appearance through intimidation and killings (ibidem). In this perspective, women's presence within the FIS's milieu, and the wider reassertion of gender norms infused with religious content, combined belief, strategy, and coercion: before the civil war, the FIS counted

women among its members, but under conditions of expanding violence many women adopted veiling to "pass unnoticed," and the hijab's persistence after the conflict also reflects its re-signification as a broader cultural identity marker rather than a simple measure of Islamist victory (ibidem).

4.2.2 Autonomous women's organisations after 1989: coalition-building, strategic differentiation, and "public politics"

In parallel, the same opening accelerated the proliferation and diversification of autonomous women's organisations, whose core agenda was framed in terms of equality, citizenship, and constitutional rights—yet whose strategic horizons were quickly reshaped by the rise of Islamism. Moghadam characterises this late-1980s/early-1990s moment as a second phase of feminist organising in which anti-fundamentalism increasingly structured agendas and alliances; she links the formation of *Association pour le Triomphe des Droits des Femmes* to strategic disagreement over how to interpret the Islamist challenge, noting that when *Égalité* appeared to equivocate, Khalida Messaoudi left to form *Triomphe*—which is an organisational split that illustrates how Islamist expansion did not simply threaten women's rights abstractly but actively reconfigured feminist organisational ecology and tactics (Moghadam, 2001, p. 138). This rupture is also witness of the etherogenity whitin women's organization. While Égalité and Triomphe can be read as the most openly *rights-centred* and politically confrontational organisations, other groups worked through more "social/civic" repertoires while still contesting discrimination (Bouatta, 1997, 14-15). In Bouatta's mapping, Émancipation explicitly argued that legal equality was necessary but insufficient in a patriarchal society: its programme foregrounded social norms, everyday constraints, and cultural representations, combining legal critique (including opposition to the Family Code) with roundtables, exhibitions, film-debate sessions, and public-awareness materials (Ibidem). Furthermore, Défense et Promotion is presented as a legally oriented association combining rights-defence with practical assistance and public education—organising conferences (often with lawyers) on the Family Code, cultural initiatives (including film projections), and "research and reflection workshops" to produce supporting papers for its advocacy (ibidem). At the

same time, this strategic variety did not prevent sustained coalition work. Bouatta's most concrete contribution here is her reconstruction of *common actions*—moments when divergent groups acted as a field. Concrete example of join efforts are mass demonstrations — such as the 8 March 1989 one in front of parliament, coupled with a delegation presenting deputies a motion condemning "integrism" — and the creation of common delegation — like the one which, on 14 April 1990, demanded to the government for improved security for women and material resources for associational work . (Bouatta, 1997, p. 16) This trajectory culminated in the first national meeting of women (30 Nov–1 Dec 1990), bringing together roughly a thousand women and fourteen associations and producing (a) a national coordination mechanism and (b) a shared platform diagnosing women's oppression as political, social, economic, and ideological, and calling—among other priorities—for an information/denunciation campaign against discriminatory legal texts (especially the Family Code) and for full citizenship (ibidem). The national meeting, together with the demonstrations and delegations around International Women's Day in 1989 and 1990, demonstrate how women's associations learned to operate as a field through collective actions. This associational consolidation also moved quickly into procedural citizenship politics. Bouatta highlights mobilisation against provisions in the electoral law that were read as enabling the appropriation of women's votes by husbands, as well as broader engagement with democratisation demands—illustrating how women's organisations were drawn into "public politics" not as a choice of narrow "feminist issues" but as a necessity produced by the political conjuncture (Bouatta, 1997, pp. 16-17). Taken together, these developments show that the post-1989 opening generated not one women's "movement" but a contested arena in which autonomous organisations expanded, differentiated, and formed coalitions under pressure—while the growing strength of Islamism simultaneously radicalised the stakes of gender equality as a marker of the democratic transition's content. (Moghadam, 2001, pp. 138–140; Bouatta, 1997, pp. 22–24).

4.3 The Black Decade: Terror as Gendered Governance

4.3.1The collapse of the transition and the onset of terror (1991–1992)

The descent into civil war was precipitated less by a gradual erosion than by a rapid institutional rupture that converted electoral contention into a security confrontation. After the first round of the December 1991 legislative elections, the FIS appeared poised to win the second round, and the election came to be framed by key actors as a regime-survival threshold rather than a routine alternation (Bouandel, 2003, p. 11). In Rahal's reconstruction, the crisis culminated in the forced resignation of President Chadli Bendjedid on 11 January 1992—an intervention she characterises as a "bloodless coup" ending the short democratisation sequence (Rahal, 2017, p. 26). The aftermath institutionalised exceptional rule: Algeria was placed under the Haut Comité d'État, a state of emergency was declared in February 1992, and the FIS was banned in March 1992, decisively narrowing the arena for legal Islamist politics (Bouandel, 2003, p. 12). This closure of procedural channels also reshaped opposition dynamics: Sebastian N. argues that repression discredited the "moderate" wager on electoral participation among many Islamists, facilitating radicalisation and making extra-institutional repertoires more plausible (Sebastian N., 2015, p. 267). For democratic and feminist actors, the result was an immediate "double bind": Moghadam captures how feminists were caught between an authoritarian state and an Islamist project perceived as misogynist and potentially theocratic, as the struggle over sovereignty became inseparable from the struggle over gender order (Moghadam, 2001, p. 139).

4.3.2 From Moral Policing to Mass Terror: Intimidation, Collective Punishment and Gendered Violence

Rather than reconstructing the Black Decade primarily through the chronology of military events and battlefield dynamics, this section focuses on terror as a repertoire of rule—that is, on the concrete *practices* of intimidation, coercion, exemplary

punishment, and mass violence through which armed actors sought to govern social life and communicate authority during the conflict. In this perspective, the spectacular brutality of the 1990s did not emerge *ex nihilo*: it built on (and radicalised) late-1980s practices of intimidation that had already begun to police women's visibility in public space. As Catherine Lloyd shows, the end of the 1980s was marked by escalating public attacks on women, often fuelled by radical Islamist preaching that cast women's "proper" role as reproductive and domestic and treated public female presence as a moral threat (Lloyd, 2006, pp. 457-458). This escalation was visible in concrete episodes *before* the civil war: women living alone were targeted (e.g., the stoning of Saléha Dekkiche in Ouargla in June 1989, followed by the burning of her house and the death of her young son), while young educated women were subjected to coercive "curfews" and violent "correction" in university residences in 1990–1991 (ibidem). These forms of intimidation mattered not only because they harmed women directly, but because they normalised the idea that women's bodies and mobility could legitimately be disciplined through public violence. This continuity is clearest when read through Lazreg's interpretation of the veil as a political *flag*—a sign through which rival projects of authority fight, with women turned into the symbolic terrain on which men struggle for power. As already seen in fact, women repeatedly become the "trope" of cultural integrity—Islamic or secular—so that visibility (especially unveiling/veiling) is coded as allegiance and invites sanction (Lazreg, 2018, pp. 216–217). Once the armed conflict consolidated, this earlier moral policing did not disappear; it intensified and militarised. Salhi describes how women rapidly rose "to the top" of armed groups' agendas as *symbols*, targeted across occupations and social positions—female public employees, shop owners (hairdressers/beauty salons), teachers and lecturers, artists, schoolgirls, and feminist activists—through assassination lists, mosque loudspeaker denunciations, and direct killings (Salhi, 2017, pp. 25–26). In this sense, terror did not merely *happen* to women as collateral damage; it weaponised gender to discipline communities. The logic of intimidation expanded into a repertoire of mass terror resembling collective punishment: violence moved from individual enforcement (threats, harassment, selective killings) to spectacular brutality aimed at producing generalized fear. Salhi explicitly traces this shift—from assassinations to "mass murders," bombings, and the ransacking of villages—where "whole populations were massacred" (Salhi, 2017, p.

26). Her narrative highlights emblematic episodes of 1997: large-scale massacres in Hay Rais (August 1997) and in Beni Messous and Bentalha (September 1997), with substantial numbers of women among the dead (Salhi, 2017, p. 26). Alongside massacre, Salhi emphasises abduction and systematic sexual violence: kidnappings of young women, gang rape, sexual enslavement, torture, mutilation, and extreme practices reported in the conflict repertoire—forms of violence that worked simultaneously as bodily punishment and as social messaging through shame, stigma, and the terrorisation of families and neighbourhoods (Salhi, 2017, pp. 26–27). Bouatta adds that abduction was sometimes framed through a pseudo-legal vocabulary in which women were treated as *ghanīma* (war booty) and compelled into what militants termed *zawāj al-mutʿa* , a so-called "pleasure marriage" presented as a way to cloak sexual violence in the form of a temporary "marriage" of variable duration—thereby re-describing rape as a licit act rather than naming it as coercion (Bouatta, 1997, p. 21). Read together with Lloyd's reconstruction of late-1980s intimidation, Lazreg's analysis of women's visibility as a recurring "flag" in power struggles, and Salhi's mapping of wartime escalation, the Black Decade appears less as a rupture than as an acceleration of gendered coercion—from harassment and moral policing to assassination, abduction, and collective punishment (Lloyd, 2006, p. 457; Lazreg, 2018, pp. 216–217; Salhi, 2017, pp. 25–27). It is also important to underline that, while Islamist armed factions developed a systematic repertoire of gendered terror, the wider conflict was also marked by allegations of human-rights violations by the state's security apparatus, and violence against women occurred within a multi-sided landscape "by all protagonists, including the military and police," reinforcing women's position as both targets and symbols within competing projects of authority (Salhi, 2017, p. 18; Lazreg, 2018, pp. 216–217). Yet this same continuity also clarifies the conditions under which women's agency took shape in the 1990s: as violence reconfigured public space through fear and stigma, women were pushed to reorganise their repertoires of action—shifting from rights-based contestation alone toward practices of survival, mutual aid, documentation, and public denunciation—while simultaneously negotiating the strategic dilemma of how to resist Islamist coercion without becoming dependent on, or absorbed by, an authoritarian security state (Bouatta, 1997, pp. 22–24; Moghadam, 2001, p. 139; Lazreg, 2018, pp. 216–217).

4.3.3 Women's Agency Under Terror: Everyday Defiance, Care Infrastructures, Documentation and transnational advocacy

Women's agency during the Black Decade is best understood as *multi-layered* rather than reducible to one "movement form." Salhi insists that speaking of "resistance strategies" should not imply a unified, centrally coordinated front: women's reactions were deeply shaped by trauma, pervasive fear, and the fact that "no place in Algeria was safe," so that resisting terror was not a heroic option but a daily necessity imposed by survival (Salhi, 2017, p. 28). From this standpoint, the agency took at least four interlocking forms.

(1) Everyday defiance and the social practice of staying in public life ("life in the face of death").

Salhi describes a first register of agency that was "social and spontaneous," shared with the wider population but distinctly gendered in its costs: continuing to *work*, move through public space, maintain social rituals, and keep children's lives "normal" despite the atmosphere of war (Salhi, 2017, pp. 28–30). This everyday defiance included sending children to school even after armed threats and calls for boycotts, and the persistence of women—teachers in particular—who continued their duties despite assassinations and targeted attacks on educational institutions; Salhi's emphasis is that every time a woman was killed, another often "filled her post," illustrating how routine continuity became a form of collective refusal to yield the social terrain to terror (ibidem). Flood's discussion reinforces this interpretation by conceptualising "resistance" under terror as a refusal of enforced withdrawal: the insistence on "ordinary" practices—showing up to work, circulating in the city, sustaining everyday life—acquires political meaning precisely because the governance of violence aims to paralyse social space and discipline women's visibility (Flood, 2017, pp. 128–129).

(2) Organised feminist action under threat: denunciation, demonstrations, and documentation.

Alongside everyday endurance, women's agency also operated through structured feminist and democratic associations—yet Bouatta underlines that terrorism

reconfigured their field: many organisations were "forced into a stance of withdrawal" to protect militants, and their continuity became uneven and sometimes only visible through press releases and declarations condemning terrorist violence (Bouatta, 1997, p. 21). Still, organisational agency did not vanish. Bouatta highlights that some women's organisations continued to participate in demonstrations against terrorism (often alongside political parties) and collectively condemned terrorist acts through public statements (Bouatta, 1997, p. 21). A crucial part of this organisational agency was making violence speakable. As Salhi notes, women were explicitly targeted through denunciations broadcast in public (e.g., mosque loudspeakers) and assassination lists, and feminist activists responded by amplifying denunciation and testimony despite the risks (Salhi, 2017, pp. 25–26). In parallel, Bouatta describes new forms of expression that emerged under terror: workshops and groups formed to "write, reflect, testify and publish" in order to preserve a memory "constituted by women's own words"—a critical move in a context where stigma and fear could silence victims twice (Bouatta, 1997, p. 21). This "memory work" is itself agency: it contests the intended political function of terror (silencing and social fragmentation) by producing collective narrative, record, and evidence. Bouatta also identifies RAFD (Rassemblement des Femmes Démocratiques) as the most publicly vocal association during the period of Islamist terrorism, noting emblematic actions that combined protest and public mourning: a rally on 8 March 1994, a march on 22 March 1994 rejecting Islamism and denouncing terrorism, and a public mourning on 3 February 1995 at the site of a car bomb attack (Bouatta, 1997, p. 21). These actions demonstrate how women's agency moved beyond "women's issues" into *democratic contestation under terror*: public space, grief, and commemoration became political instruments.

(3) Care, shelters, and socio-humanitarian infrastructures under conditions of fear and stigma.

A third register of agency worked through what Bouatta calls socio-humanitarian associations, which—precisely because they provided care—could maintain activity even when more confrontational political work became dangerous. She notes that groups such as SOS Femmes en Détresse, IQRAA, and the Association for Family Planning continued their activities by keeping a "low profile" (Bouatta, 1997, p. 21). This form of agency matters because wartime gendered violence depended heavily on

stigma (especially around abduction and rape) to isolate victims; maintaining support infrastructures countered the social logic of terror by sustaining pathways of assistance, listening, and community contact. Salhi's later discussion of post-conflict activism also reinforces how these infrastructures gradually helped shift violence "from taboo to public issue." She describes how SOS Femmes en Détresse convened a conference in Algiers in October 2000 on violence against women and children and helped establish a network that published its own report, while also creating legal/psychological assistance channels (Salhi, 2017, p. 37). Even if this is chronologically "after" the peak years, it is analytically continuous: it shows how wartime survival practices and associational persistence laid groundwork for institutionalised forms of support and public problematization of violence.

(4) Symbolic defiance and cultural production

The agency also took cultural and symbolic forms that—without replacing street politics—expanded the repertoire of resistance. Lloyd highlights how widespread violence broke prior social norms and enabled women not only to attend funerals but sometimes to lead them; funerals became sites of collective defiance and "political" demonstrations in a broad sense (Lloyd, 2006, p. 459). She also underscores the "outpouring" of women's writing on fear, violence, and daily confrontation, connecting cultural production to resistance and to the redefinition of voice under terror (Lloyd, 2006, p. 459). As Maria Flood shows, already at the start of the crisis, women used images as political instruments: in January 1992, women staged mass demonstrations in major Algerian cities against the FIS, displaying photographs of victims of terrorism and distributing documents summarising FIS leaders' anti-democratic statements—an explicitly symbolic attempt to occupy public forums that Islamist actors were seeking to control, especially regarding women's presence in the street (Flood, 2017, p. 118). In Flood's reading, this performative and visual politics matters precisely because the "woman question" was becoming an emblematic terrain of contestation: controlling women's bodies, visibility, and mobility operated as a proxy for wider struggles over political authority and moral order (Flood, 2017, p. 118). Flood also highlights the ambivalence of iconic representations of victimhood, notably the widely circulated photograph known as *La Madone de Bentalha*. While such imagery helped render visible an otherwise underreported conflict and crystallised international attention

around civilian suffering, Flood stresses that an exclusive focus on the suffering female victim risks obscuring the "multiple and manifold forms of female resistance" and the gender-specific patterning of attacks (Flood, 2017, pp. 117–118). In other words, the same visual economy that publicised terror could also *flatten women into symbols*, whereas women were simultaneously agents who organised, protested, and attempted to contest Islamist capture of public space (Flood, 2017, p. 118). Furthermore, cultural production—especially cinema—functioned as a further register of symbolic resistance and testimony. Flood situates Yamina Bachir-Chouikh's film *Rachida* as part of a post-1990s cinematic turn that narrates the conflict through everyday life and fear, foregrounding how women became both targets and meaning-bearing figures in the struggle over public morality (Flood, 2017, pp. 119–121). Importantly, Flood notes that *Rachida*'s protagonist is "unveiled, single, and educated," and that her appearance becomes coded as a marker of agency and resistance—yet also as a source of heightened vulnerability in a political landscape where women's visibility is punished (Flood, 2017, p. 122). Read this way, cultural production becomes part of the repertoire through which Algerian women's experiences are politicised, narrated, and contested, and through which gendered terror is rendered intelligible as both coercion and symbolic governance (Flood, 2017, pp. 118–122).

5) Cross-border organising, diaspora infrastructures, and transnational advocacy

Women's agency during the Black Decade also operated through transnational infrastructures, where exile, migration, and NGO arenas became resources for survival, visibility, and political pressure. Lloyd shows that international solidarity was not only "symbolic" but also *practical and project-based*: Algerian associations built partnerships with organisations abroad to exchange expertise and material support, including initiatives such as *Un bateau livre pour l'Algérie* (a book-collection campaign in France) and—most notably—the 1998 "Caravane" of Algerian associations touring France to organise joint projects and counter media narratives that reduced Algeria to violence alone (Lloyd, 1999a, pp. 486–487). This cross-border field was anchored in diaspora networks (especially in France), which provided *logistical continuity* under conditions of insecurity: for example, women's organisations sometimes used France as a base for activity by keeping funds in trusted bank accounts there, later transferring

money in small amounts to Algeria (Lloyd, 2006, p. 459). A particularly emblematic example of this outward-facing strategy is RAFD's attempt to mobilise legal repertoires beyond Algeria: Moghadam notes that the association pursued a civil action in Washington, DC against the FIS and its representative-in-exile, signalling how documentation and testimony were paired with transnational legal and advocacy channels to counter impunity and contest Islamist legitimacy abroad (Moghadam, 2001, p. 142).Alongside this, migrant solidarity also sustained support structures for exiles and asylum seekers, through cooperation between migrants' organisations and solidarity groups (ibidem). Women's activism also scaled up politically through regional and UN-linked platforms. Lloyd traces how, as violence against women became "political and absolute" in the 1990s, women's resistance extended beyond national boundaries through Maghreb Égalité 95 (Algerian–Moroccan–Tunisian coordination for the Beijing Conference, 1995), which prioritised violence against women and cooperated with networks such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws and Women Against Fundamentalisms (ibidem). The same trajectory is echoed in Salhi's synthesis, which emphasises how international networking served *both* to secure resources for survivors (shelters, equipment, medicines) and to produce a counter-discourse to Western representations that framed Islamists primarily as victims of state repression (Salhi, 2017, pp. 33–35).

4.4 After the Black Decade: Post-Terror "Normalisation" and the Afterlives of Women's Mobilisation

By the late 1990s, the regime sought to stabilise a conflict that had deeply eroded state legitimacy and social trust, advancing an "exit" from the Black Decade less through a full clarification of responsibilities than through a political strategy of demobilisation and controlled normalisation. In the literature this thesis is taking into consideration, a first central move is the April 1999 presidential election that brought Abdelaziz Bouteflika to office, widely read as regime-managed and anchored in the armed forces' arbitral power; as Bouandel puts it, *"it was the military that brought him to power,"* a reminder that pluralism after 1989 never fully displaced the army's role as ultimate

gatekeeper of the political field (Bouandel, 2003, p. 19). Secondly, the "peace" sequence that followed: Lloyd notes the AIS ceasefire (June 1999) and the "Civil Concord" referendum (September 1999), which aimed to demobilise segments of the insurgency through conditional amnesties and reintegration—an approach that "signalled" a desire to close the conflict, even as the social and political costs of that closure remained heavily contested (Lloyd, 1999, pp. 487-488).In Salhi's reconstruction, by the end of the decade the state could plausibly claim that the army had "succeeded in neutralising the threat that Islamism represented for the state," and that international perceptions after 9/11 further reframed Algeria's earlier anti-insurgent campaign as part of a wider counter-terrorism register (Salhi, 2017, pp. 35-36). Sebastian N. complements this by treating the late 1990s as the moment when a decade-long civil war "came to an end," producing a postwar "status quo" under continued military predominance—a political stabilisation that reduced large-scale conflict but did not automatically resolve the structural legitimacy problem opened in 1988–89 (Sebastian N., 2015, p. 267). Yet narrating this phase as a simple "end of terror" risks reproducing what women's scholarship repeatedly problematises: the idea of a closed chapter in which women appear mainly as *emblems* of victimhood rather than as political actors navigating (and contesting) the terms of closure. Lloyd's framing of Algeria as a "virtual" civil war already signals the analytical issue: violence and intimidation did not only occur "on the battlefield," but operated as a mode of public-sphere governance, in which women's visibility and mobility became political stakes (Lloyd, 1999, p. 479). Flood similarly underlines the ambivalence of iconic representations of victimhood, notably the widely circulated photograph known as *La Madone de Bentalha*: while such imagery could crystallise attention around civilian suffering, an exclusive focus on "passive female suffering" risks obscuring the "multiple and manifold forms of female resistance," as well as the gendered patterning of violence itself (Flood, 2017, p. 117). This post-terror "settlement" also invites a methodological warning : the widespread tendency to narrate the 1990s as an *almost total eclipse*—a kind of "invisible" social condition reducible to victimhood—risks reproducing the very silencing mechanisms produced by terror. Lloyd explicitly argues that concentrating on violence *alone* can "obscure" the forms of resistance that persisted and reorganised under conflict conditions (Lloyd, 1999a, p. 488). Salhi makes a closely

aligned point from a gendered angle: the decade was formative precisely because women's experiences of targeted violence were transformed into *political capacity*, accelerating solidarity, denunciation, and organisational innovation (Salhi, 2017, pp. 16–17, 35–36). The "dual struggle" led by Algerian women during the 1990s – resisting Islamist femicide while maintaining the longer rights-based battle for full citizenship, and building durable networks "both nationally and internationally," — continued to structure activism after the violence receded (ibidem). Seen through this lens, the post-1999 phase does not mark a return to a pre-war condition, but rather a constrained reconfiguration of the political arena in which women's movements attempted to translate wartime endurance into renewed bargaining over rights, memory, and the institutional meaning of peace. As the peace process opened, women's organisations sought to prevent a political equivalence between "terrorists and their victims" and to keep women's rights on the agenda; yet the same process generated a "danger of a major rift" between associations over whether to compromise on issues such as piecemeal reform of the Family Code or the treatment of former terrorists and their families (Lloyd, 1999, p. 488). Moghadam's analysis captures a similar postwar tension inside the women's movement: she notes that "cracks" emerged among women's groups both "since the normalization process began in Algeria" and "during the Bouteflika presidency," reflecting divergent responses to changing "legal and political status" and to the dilemma of whether (and how) to engage a state-led reconciliation agenda without sacrificing the longer struggle for full citizenship (Moghadam, 2001, p. 151)

4.5 Conclusion of Chapter 4

Women's agency across the 1989 opening, the Black Decade, and the post-1999 "exit" should not be read as a story of disappearance. Even if a significant strand of writing tends to render the 1990s primarily through violence—producing what Lloyd explicitly warns can become an analytical obscuring of women's continuing resistance—this chapter has shown that agency persisted by changing form rather than vanishing (Lloyd, 1999a, p. 488). The 1989 opening did not "create" women's mobilisation but rendered it organisationally and legally legible, allowing women's associations to occupy an

emerging public arena with rights-based claims already developed in the 1980s (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6). When terror escalated, that same agency did not collapse into silence: it reorganised into practices calibrated to survival and intimidation—documentation and testimony, mutual aid and care infrastructures, public denunciation, and transnational advocacy—while sustaining the longer struggle over citizenship and legal equality (Bouatta, 1997, p. 21; Salhi, 2017, pp. 16–17, 35–36). In this cumulative trajectory, the "dual struggle" identified by Salhi—resisting gendered terror while maintaining the rights-based battle for full citizenship, through durable networks "both nationally and internationally"—became the enduring political grammar that carried women's activism beyond the peak of violence and into the constrained arena of postwar "normalisation" (Salhi, 2017, pp. 16–17, 35–36; Lloyd, 1999a, p. 10).

Chapter 5 - Algeria's 2011 Moment and the Hirak Movement: From Contained Reform to Mass Mobilisation

In Algeria, the regional shock of 2011 arrived in a country already living under a post–Black Decade political grammar: stability was repeatedly presented as the regime's principal achievement, and the memory of the 1990s functioned as a constant warning against uncontrolled rupture. In this setting, contention did surface in early 2011, but it struggled to scale into a unified, regime-threatening coalition—both because oppositional coordination remained fragile and because the state proved highly skilled at dispersing mobilisation through calibrated concessions and selective policing (Del Panta, 2017, pp. 1086–1087, 1099; Volpi, 2013, pp. 108–109). Yet this period cannot be read only through containment. It also reshaped the conditions of participation—especially for women—through a characteristic mix of selective inclusion and structural constraint. Women's "space" expanded in visible ways (legal reforms, quota-based representation, and public-facing narratives of modernisation), but the translation of participation into enforceable citizenship remained uneven, often mediated by party gatekeeping, weak implementation, and the persistence of gendered power inside institutions and everyday life (Youssef, 2020, pp. 130–133; Kaci, 2024, pp. 22–23; Salhi, 2009, p. 122). Over time, the gap between managed reform and lived stagnation widened, and what appeared in 2011 as containable unrest accumulated into a broader crisis of legitimacy. When mass mobilisation finally erupted in 2019 around the refusal of a fifth term, women were not peripheral spectators: they were immediately present in the streets and became central to how public space, civic unity, and the very meaning of "politics" were performed (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, p. 81; Lassel, 2020, pp. 40–41). At the same time, the chapter follows a tension that runs through the movement itself: women's visibility could be celebrated as a symbol of national civility while feminist claims were policed as "divisive" or postponed through "machiwaqtism" ("it is not the time"), pushing many activists to combine public presence with more protected forms of coordination and agenda-setting (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, p. 81; Chaif & Etheridge, 2025, pp. 1, 6).

5.1 Bouteflika's regime and the Algerian 2011

5.1.1 Abdelaziz Bouteflika's regime and women's space: stabilisation politics, selective inclusion, and constrained agency

In the post–Black Decade configuration, Bouteflika's regime consolidated a model of rule centred on regime-managed stabilisation: an "exit" from mass-scale civil conflict that privileged order, institutional continuity, and controlled pluralism over deep political liberalisation. While Frédéric Volpi locates a crucial hinge in 1999—when a "general armistice" effectively ended the Islamist insurrection and reduced violence to a level the state could "manage"—he also stresses that Algerian authoritarian resilience rested on calibrated combinations of pseudo-democratisation, co-optation/division of oppositions, and rent-based redistribution (Volpi, 2013, p. 106; pp. 108–109). Bouandel reinforces the institutional meaning of this hinge by reading the April 1999 presidential election as a regime-managed succession: Bouteflika was "the military's choice," and "it was the military that brought him to power," with the election functioning primarily to confer legitimacy rather than to produce genuine competition (Bouandel, 2003, p. 19). In the same vein, Sebastian N. characterises Algeria's postwar order as one in which democratic procedures remain largely "decorative," since the military "in practice, remains the real power centre," thereby delimiting the substantive content of political pluralism (Sebastian N., 2015, p. 267). This helps clarify why "reform" under Bouteflika often operated as a repertoire of legitimation and containment: formal pluralism coexisted with party-system weakness and executive dominance, visible in Bouandel's discussion of party manipulation around the 1999 contest and in institutional arrangements (closed lists, party financing, and an upper chamber partly appointed by the president) that reduce parliamentary autonomy and reward conformism (Bouandel, 2003, pp. 17–19). Within this architecture, political participation could be expanded in form, but the costs of autonomous aggregation remained high and oppositional convergence remained fragile—dynamics that later shaped the partial, dispersed character of protest in 2011 and the longer arc toward 2019 (Del Panta, 2017, pp. 1086–1087, 1099; Volpi, 2013, pp. 108–109). Women's "space" under this regime expanded in ways that were real yet structurally ambivalent, combining top-down legal reforms, engineered representation gains, and continuing bottom-up activism around

enforcement and gender-based violence. In Youssef's account, many feminists—especially among secular elites—perceived Bouteflika as a comparatively protective option against Islamist resurgence, and credited him with supporting or imposing reforms that strengthened women's legal position, including the 2005 amendments to the Family Code and changes enabling women to transmit nationality (Youssef, 2020, pp. 130–133). Salhi's retrospective account helps specify how this reformism was publicly framed: after his 1999 election, Bouteflika repeatedly promised to promote women's cause, yet insisted that "mentalities were not ready" for major changes to the Family Code—endorsing women's presence in public life while simultaneously signalling the political limits of legal transformation (Salhi, 2009, p. 122). In Salhi's reading, this gradualist stance interacted with deeper post-conflict social shifts: far from withdrawing, women occupied "new and non-customary positions," and the Family Code's provisions began to erode in practice as economic crisis, male unemployment/out-migration, and postwar disruptions pushed women into roles and sectors previously coded as male (Salhi, 2009, p. 122). Yet women's condition cannot be reduced to law-on-the-books: Youssef emphasises persistent implementation gaps (e.g., unequal awareness of rights and uneven judicial practice) and institutional neglect in areas such as gender-based violence and support infrastructures, which kept women's citizenship practically contested (Youssef, 2020, pp. 132–133). The same ambivalence appears in the representational arena. Kaci shows how state reforms framed women's representation as a political objective and translated it into quota-based electoral mechanisms (including post-2011 provisions such as Organic Law 12/03), producing higher numbers of women in elected bodies while leaving substantial limits on women's substantive influence within party hierarchies and strategic portfolios (Kaci, 2024, pp. 18–20, 22–23, 24). This regime-shaped inclusion also interacted with socio-economic change, where measurable advances often remained gender-segmented and unevenly convertible into agency. Drawing on Naila Kabeer's resources–agency–achievements framework, Bouzidi, Mostefaoui, and Benlebbad insist that empowerment is not simply access to resources but the ability to exercise choice and convert opportunities into outcomes; they emphasise that women's incorporation into education, work, and entrepreneurial initiatives coexisted with structural constraints and sectoral concentration (for instance, women's employment clustering in health and social work),

limiting the depth of empowerment in practice (Bouzidi et al., 2025, pp. 2–4, 6). This pattern resonates with Yadav's broader argument that war can generate ruptures in restrictive gender norms, but the key question is whether such ruptures become durable or are contained by a partial return to pre-conflict patriarchal arrangements (Yadav, 2020, p. 2). In Algeria, women's agency therefore remained "dual-tracked": partly channelled through state-managed inclusion and legal reform, yet also sustained through associational work that sought to translate survival and wartime mobilisation into post-conflict claims—especially on violence against women. Lloyd's account of the post-1990s shift "from taboo to transnational political issue" illustrates this continuity: women's organisations such as SOS Femmes en Détresse helped institutionalise advocacy and support networks, including initiatives linking documentation, assistance, and demands for legal protection, even as stigma and institutional shortcomings persisted (Lloyd, 2006, pp. 459–460).

5.1.2 The 2011 in Algeria: A Managed Protest Moment

Across the region, the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings rapidly transformed authoritarian landscapes, toppling long-standing rulers and opening short, highly volatile "liminal" windows of mass contention. In much of the literature, Algeria is frequently portrayed as an "exception" to this regional wave—or even as a case where there was "no Arab uprising"—a shorthand that captures the absence of regime collapse but risks overstating the idea of non-mobilisation (Del Panta, 2017, p. 1085; Volpi, 2013, p. 105). Algeria's "missed" Arab Spring is therefore best explained not by an absence of grievances or protest episodes, but by the inability of contention to scale up into a unified, regime-threatening coalition in 2011. Del Panta shows that the country did experience a genuine shock—nationwide riots and protest attempts in early 2011—yet this wave dissipated quickly because it remained socially intense but politically uncoordinated, and because the opposition failed to build a durable "negative coalition" capable of aggregating heterogeneous actors behind the minimal objective of regime removal (Del Panta, 2017, pp. 1086–1087). Crucially, the working class—often decisive in successful uprisings—was the "missing element": long-term deindustrialisation

reduced its strategic weight, while the hydrocarbon sector created an "aristocracy of labour" whose material position lowered incentives for escalation (Del Panta, 2017, pp. 1091–1092). This structural constraint interacted with a political one: civil-war legacies sustained deep distrust and fragmentation among oppositional currents, making coordination costly and easily reversible (Del Panta, 2017, pp. 1086, 1099). Volpi reaches a convergent conclusion from an institutional angle, arguing that Algerian authoritarian resilience relied on a calibrated combination of pseudo-democratisation, co-optation and division of oppositions, and rent-based redistribution; in 2011, the state responded to unrest by rapidly adjusting economic measures and deploying selective policing to prevent the stabilisation of a central protest arena—most visibly around May First Square in Algiers—while opposition initiatives such as the National Coordination for Change and Democracy struggled to broaden their social base and to manage internal tensions over Islamist participation (Volpi, 2013, pp. 105, 108–109). The same "defusing" logic is visible in the regime's reform repertoire after 2011, where participation was expanded in form while contentious aggregation remained constrained in substance: for instance, reforms framed as enhancing women's political representation—including the post-2011 Organic Law 12/03—linked women's candidacies to party incentives and contributed to higher representation in elected councils, reinforcing a channel of controlled inclusion rather than opening a rupture-prone cycle of mobilisation (Kaci, 2024, pp. 22–23). Finally, youth-focused analyses help explain why activism persisted without producing a 2011 tipping point: as Desrues and Garcia de Paredes note (via Thieux's Algerian case study), human-rights associations—including those defending women's rights and civic participation—did emerge as part of earlier liberalisation windows but were later "pigeonholed" by the civil-war cleavage structure, reducing their capacity for action and leaving, by the Bouteflika era, a generational succession problem in which younger cohorts—socialised after the war—were less anchored to inherited ideological divisions and more oriented to local uncertainties than to regime-change coalitions (Desrues & Garcia de Paredes, 2021, p. 196). Taken together, the "missed" liminal moment in 2011 appears as a combination of coalition incapacity, a regime skilled at dispersing and managing contention, and an associational field that continued to exist but struggled to transform dispersed protests into a convergent national uprising (Del Panta, 2017, pp. 1086–1087;

Volpi, 2013, pp. 108–109; Desrues & Garcia de Paredes, 2021, p. 196). At the same time, rather than closing the cycle of contention, 2011 can be read as the beginning of an incubation phase: the failure to crystallise into a unified rupture did not eliminate mobilisation but displaced it into longer-term processes of networking, framing, and repertoire-building—especially through digitally mediated arenas—so that energies that could not translate into regime change in 2011 accumulated in latent form and later contributed to the rapid activation and disciplined mass mobilisation of the Hirak in 2019 (Sawicka, 2019, pp. 78–82, 84–85).

5.2 The Hirak movement: women's participation, resistance–negotiation repertoires and empowerment constraints

5.2.1 Hirak as a regime-challenging mobilization and a gendered civic arena

The Hirak emerged in Algeria in February 2019 as a sustained cycle of weekly Friday mobilisations contesting the political order and the entrenched clientelist-bureaucratic system commonly referred to as *le pouvoir*. In the formulation proposed by Nilsson Rabia, the Hirak combined a regime-change horizon ("the fall of the regime, including the military") with the dynamics of a mass civic arena in which women's presence became unusually visible and politically consequential, in contrast to earlier episodes of contention that did not generate the same cross-class, cross-generational, and nationally resonant participation by women (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, p. 81). The protest wave was catalysed by the attempt of Abdelaziz Bouteflika to pursue a fifth term and culminated, under sustained street pressure and elite realignment, in his resignation on 2 April 2019 (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, p. 81). Lassel's account of the early weeks of mobilisation reinforces this picture from an observational angle, emphasising the scale and diversity of women's presence from the outset: women of different ages and social classes joined the Friday marches from 22 February 2019, visibly occupying central streets with banners rejecting the fifth term and framing the uprising as a break with accumulated violence and authoritarian stagnation (Lassel, 2020, pp. 40–41).

5.2.2 Women's agency inside and around the Hirak: contested claims and "off-stage" repertoires

Analytically, the Hirak can be read as a moment in which women's agency was performed publicly at scale, but under conditions still structured by long-standing patriarchal constraints and by earlier patterns of state-led co-optation of women's rights. Nilsson Rabia shows that women's participation was both extensive and contested: while women were highly present in the marches, demands explicitly framed around women's rights, identity, or religion were often dismissed by other protesters and influential voices as insufficiently "political" and potentially divisive for a movement prioritising institutional change (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, p. 81). The episode of the "feminist square" in Algiers captures this mechanism: rather than being absorbed into a plural agenda, feminist visibility was met with delegitimation and harassment, including smear campaigns on social media and instances of verbal and physical intimidation (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, p. 81). At the same time, and importantly for avoiding a purely "backlash" reading, Lassel documents that the Feminist Square also operated as a recurring organisational node within the Hirak: a weekly meeting point (notably in front of the Central Faculty in Algiers) where activists and associations from different regions assembled to foreground demands such as repealing the Family Code, protecting women's access to education and work, and guaranteeing freedom of movement and safety in public space (Lassel, 2020, p. 44). Against this contested backdrop, Nilsson Rabia proposes a differentiated understanding of women's agency: many women shared the Hirak's central demand of dismantling *le pouvoir*, but—precisely to avoid accusations of "depoliticising" the protest—often displaced gender-specific claims into everyday, semi-informal spaces where women routinely gather, thereby sustaining demands in a safer register that remained compatible with the movement's unity narrative (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, p. 81). This relocation does not indicate passivity; it is a tactical adaptation that protects women's participation within a contentious environment where feminist claims can trigger intra-movement sanction (ibidem). This gatekeeping logic also appears in digital arenas. Based on an anonymous structured questionnaire with feminist demonstrators in Algeria and the diaspora, Chaif and Etheridge find that

feminists repeatedly encountered “machiwaqtism” (“it is not the time”) when attempting to integrate women’s rights into the broader reform agenda, alongside pervasive online hostility—summarised by one participant as “misogyny was in the atmosphere” (Chaif & Etheridge, 2025, pp. 1, 6). Rather than serving as an open deliberative sphere, social media—especially feminist Facebook groups—functioned primarily as guarded spaces for within-group coordination, slogan refinement, and recruitment, precisely because intergroup engagement was perceived as unsafe and politically futile (Chaif & Etheridge, 2025, pp. 5–6).

5.2.3 Empowerment constraints and bargaining logics: resources, agency, and the politics of everyday life

Bouzidi, Mostefaoui, and Benlebbad provide a useful conceptual backbone for interpreting why the expansion of women’s visibility in the Hirak should not be equated automatically with transformative empowerment. Following Naila Kabeer’s framework, they stress that empowerment cannot be measured through resources alone (education, employment access, legal provisions), but must be assessed through the conversion of resources into agency (the capacity to exercise choice) and achievements (effective outcomes) (Bouzidi et al., 2025, pp. 2–3). They further argue that women’s ability to translate participation and resource gains into durable outcomes remains mediated by “deeper levels” of empowerment—i.e., the structural gender relations that govern family life, workplaces, and institutions—often reproducing women’s subordinate role as caregivers while reserving public authority and protection functions to men (Bouzidi et al., 2025, pp. 3–4). In this respect, Bouzidi et al.’s emphasis on bargaining is analytically productive for the Hirak: women’s activities are frequently constrained by male authority, limiting access to leadership and decision-making while pushing women into continuous negotiation over behavioural norms (mobility, dress, and socially acceptable schedules) across social classes (Bouzidi et al., 2025, p. 4). Nilsson Rabia’s interview material illustrates how this bargaining logic became politically legible during the Hirak. A striking demand voiced by women participants concerned economic recognition of unpaid domestic labour: across social positions, women expressed claims

to a portion of hydrocarbon wealth and proposed a monthly allowance for housewives, framing it both as recognition of household work and as a route to greater autonomy from male household gatekeepers (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, pp. 82–84). This demand bridges regime critique and intimate-structural inequality: it is simultaneously political (redistribution and accountability over state resources) and emancipatory in everyday terms (reducing dependence inside the household), aligning with Bouzidi et al.'s insistence that empowerment depends on the conversion of resources into actionable choice (Bouzidi et al., 2025, pp. 2–4). Finally, Nilsson Rabia highlights the spatial dimension of agency: the Hirak enabled women to reappropriate public space on Fridays—previously coded as male-dominated and religiously patterned—while also exposing continuing restrictions tied to time (public presence after sunset) and place (male-dominated cafés), where women's visibility is policed through moral scrutiny and the regulation of cross-gender interaction (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, p. 84). Taken together, the Hirak suggests a partial reconfiguration—rather than a resolution—of the long-standing dilemma of women's political participation in Algeria. Women's mass mobilisation clearly sustained the protest's civic breadth and legitimacy, and some scholarship goes further in emphasising that feminist presence and organising were not merely "auxiliary" but politically consequential for the movement's endurance, with Lassel even arguing that the fall of Bouteflika cannot be separated from women's collective engagement and the mobilisation infrastructure crystallised around feminist spaces during the uprising (Lassel, 2020, pp. 44–45). Yet the same moment also reveals the persistence of gender instrumentalization in a more subtle form than in earlier periods of state-led co-optation: women's visibility is widely valued as a symbol of national unity and democratic civility, while women's rights claims can still be treated as untimely or secondary—dismissed as "not political enough" or framed as a threat to coalition cohesion (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, p. 81). This tension is reinforced in digital arenas, where feminists report encountering "machiwaqtism" ("it is not the time") and pervasive misogynistic hostility, which pushes women to protect their agenda through guarded, within-group coordination rather than open deliberation (Chaif & Etheridge, 2025, pp. 1, 5–6). In this sense, the Hirak marks a shift: women are more publicly recognised and more capable of articulating an autonomous voice, but that autonomy continues to be negotiated against movement gatekeeping and patriarchal norms that

seek to confine gender equality to “later,” rather than integrating it into the definition of political change in the present (Nilsson Rabia, 2023, p. 81; Chaif & Etheridge, 2025, pp. 1, 6).

CONCLUSION

This thesis has traced a central Algerian paradox: women are repeatedly positioned at the core of the nation's moral and symbolic economy, yet they are persistently denied durable access to the institutional arenas where sovereignty, citizenship, and rights are concretely decided. Across the periods examined, this is not an accidental outcome but the product of gender instrumentalization—the strategic mobilisation of women's bodies, roles, and "rights" by multiple actors to stabilise authority, arbitrate legitimacy, and police boundaries of moral order. A first major finding concerns genealogy. The later tension that casts women's claims as "Westernisation" and frames gender equality as a threat to authenticity does not emerge only in the post-1980s Islamist conjuncture: it is partly rooted in the earliest colonial instrumentalization of Algerian women, when "emancipation" could be staged as proof of civilisation and political superiority while remaining selective, performative, and unaccountable to women themselves. This colonial repertoire helped install women's visibility and the regulation of the family as a privileged site where political projects define enemies, narrate modernity, and produce moral hierarchies—creating a symbolic infrastructure that subsequent actors could reactivate, invert, and weaponise. The post-independence state does not resolve this structure; it reorganises it. Even when equality is affirmed in principle, women's enforceable citizenship is repeatedly displaced into the moralised governance of family and "social order," culminating in the consolidating force of the Family Code, where the contradiction between emancipatory rhetoric and constrained citizenship becomes legally durable. A second major finding is organisational and speaks directly to women's agency. The thesis shows that women's capacity to resist instrumentalization becomes qualitatively stronger when women move from party-managed "participation" toward autonomous association-building. In the 1980s, the limits of official representation—especially through UNFA—pushed activists to construct independent infrastructures and a rights-based grammar of claims-making, illustrated by the turn toward associational form after 1984 and the founding of *Egalité* (Bouatta, 1997, p. 6; Lazreg, 2018, pp. 195–196). This shift matters in the conclusion because it explains a core causal mechanism in your narrative: autonomy increases not only freedom of agenda-setting, but also tactical flexibility—the ability to recalibrate repertoires as

conditions change, to alternate between public visibility and strategic discretion, and to build coalitions beyond state supervision. That flexibility became analytically decisive during the Black Decade. Here, the thesis rejects the idea—still present in parts of scholarship and public memory—that the 1990s represent an "eclipse" in which women disappear into victimhood. Instead, violence is shown to operate as a technology of discipline that contests women's access to public space and seeks to silence their determination "to speak and act for themselves" (Lloyd, 2006, p. 460). Crucially, however, the very attempt to govern society through gendered terror helps illuminate the evolution of agency: women's activism does not vanish; it transforms. The thesis demonstrates how repertoires expand from legal contestation alone into survival and continuity in public life, documentation and testimony, mutual aid and shelters, public denunciation and commemoration, and sustained transnational advocacy (Bouatta, 1997, p. 21; Salhi, 2017, pp. 16–17, 35–36). In other words, the thesis can argue—without determinism—that colonialism helped sediment the symbolic and social mechanisms through which women become a key site of political boundary-making, while the civil war radicalised these mechanisms into a repertoire of terror that sought to discipline women's space through fear, stigma, and exemplary punishment. At the same time, using Loyd's word, women's collective action contributes to transforming violence "from a taboo into a campaigning issue" with transnational dimensions (Lloyd, 2006, pp. 453–454). In fact, women's agency under terror is not only endurance but also politicisation—the production of language, evidence, organisations, and cross-border networks capable of naming violence and contesting the moral order that violence tries to impose. Finally, the postwar phase confirms the thesis' long-range argument: "normalisation" does not simply close the chapter of terror; it reopens bargaining over citizenship, memory, and legitimacy under constrained political conditions. The "dual struggle" continues to structure activism—resisting gendered coercion while sustaining the longer rights-based battle for full citizenship, consolidated through networks "both nationally and internationally" (Salhi, 2017, pp. 16–17, 35–36).

Taken together, the thesis sustains a single core conclusion: gender instrumentalization has continuously shaped Algerian women's space and agency by turning women into symbols and stakes of political struggle; yet women have persistently resisted this reduction, and their resistance becomes most durable when it is organisationally

autonomous—capable of shifting repertoires, surviving terror, and translating violence into contestation, documentation, care infrastructures, and transnational advocacy. Furthermore, in the Algerian case, gender instrumentalization operates as a political hinge: it links high politics (sovereignty, regime legitimacy, national identity) to everyday governance (family law, morality, public space), helping explain why gender repeatedly becomes the battlefield through which broader historical conflicts are fought. Two limits of this research should be acknowledged. First, the thesis is grounded in historical reconstruction and secondary scholarship across a long time span; this enables a cumulative reading of instrumentalization and resistance, but it necessarily limits access to micro-level variation in lived experience—how different groups of women, across regions, classes, generations, and linguistic identities, interpreted and navigated the costs of visibility, respectability, or withdrawal in specific settings. Second, the focus on ruptures (war, legal codification, democratic openings, civil conflict, mass mobilisation) strengthens the argument about gender politics in moments of crisis, but it may under-represent slower transformations in "ordinary" periods—incremental institutional shifts, everyday negotiations inside households, and local-level practices that do not become visible as national mobilisation. These limits point toward clear future perspectives. Further research could test and refine the framework through oral histories and local case studies that reconstruct women's situated decision-making, especially in under-studied rural areas and outside Algiers-centric archives. A comparative extension could also clarify what is specifically Algerian and what is structurally shared across postcolonial settings by applying the same lens to other Maghreb or MENA trajectories, particularly around the relationship between family law, moral legitimacy, and Islamist mobilisation. Finally, the transnational dimension traced here—diaspora infrastructures, international advocacy, and the shift of violence from taboo to campaigning issue—invites deeper mapping of how frames, resources, and strategies circulate between Algerian and European public spheres, and how these circulations reshape both the possibilities and the constraints of women's agency in the present.

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