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Algerian feminism

Before the Revolution: an interview with W, Algerian Marxist-feminist.

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The following interview was conducted by Margaux Wartelle, and appears in the July-August issue of the Marseille-based [CQFD](#), a 'monthly journal of critique and social experimentation'. We have retained the original introduction (italicized below); the footnotes are Wartelle's.

For more on the feminist movement in Algeria, see *al-Muzhar t's* translations of the [Women for Change towards Equality](#) (5 May) and the [Feminine Resistances Space](#) (6 June).

On the 8 March, during the third act of the Algerian uprising, W. and her comrades unfurled a huge banner: "Abrogation du code de la famille" ("Repeal the Family Code") a message applauded by some, though not well understood by everyone. [1] 'We've still got work to do', sighed the founder of the Collectif libre et indépendant des femmes de Bāja (Bijayah), in Smaller Kabylia.

At 25 years old, W. is a militant with the Parti socialiste des travailleurs (PST; a Trotskyist organisation) whilst participating in the Collectif des Femmes d'Aokas, in her parents' village, 30 kilometres from Bāja. Three months after our first encounter, she brought us, by telephone, further news of the Algerian feminist movement.

You've just taken part in two days of national meetings organised by women's collectives. What came out of it?

The meeting was held on the border of Bijayah's wilayah [an administrative region, in this case Kabylia]. There were seventeen collectives, from across the country, the majority of which were created after 8 March 2019. There were, of course, women from Algiers, Oran, and Constantine; new collectives from the south – Ouargla, Ghardaia, Tamanrasset – were meant to come, but it wasn't possible, due to logistical issues. This is a pity, since the women of the south have for a long time remained invisible, and these collectives embody a real change.

The idea was, above all, to meet, to make links. We tried to identify our points of agreement, but it was complicated, since it was rather a mixed bag [un peu une grande ratatouille]: there were women of the right, of the left, different generations, women who are militants in France, LGBT collectives who work underground.

When we say we want an egalitarian society, we all need to agree. Some don't want to dissociate religion from the state, for example, and not everyone speaks about the precarity of women.

And what did you achieve?

This time, the militants of the left won a little (laughs).

We have managed to write a shared declaration, which will serve as a basis for a future manifesto. Seventeen collectives have signed, and three want to join us. The struggle against precarious work and the repealing of the Family Code are included in the declaration.

How do you see the evolution of the movement of contestation on the question of women's rights?

From the 22 February, women have gone out to the streets. Since the 8 March, there have been more specifically feminist demands. Every Friday in Algiers, women organise their own bloc within the demonstration, with their own slogans. They have however been attacked. On television, some people say that feminism has never existed in Algeria, that these women are manipulated by outside sources, that they want to break with tradition. As if feminists weren't really Algerians! There have even been rape threats. Fortunately, things quietened, particularly because all the collectives have united against these forms of violence.

Have the political parties grasped these questions?

Some people seized on them, but not necessarily in the right way. For instance, a new collective that was created, La soci t  civile , which includes especially people from Front des forces socialistes (FFS), the Rassemblement actions jeunesse (RAJ), but also some Islamists. These are very different people, who might start a meeting with a prayer, then refuse to do a minute of silence for Kamel Eddine Fekhar, a militant who died from a hunger strike, although the RAJ held a rally in tribute to him. [2] On the question of women, they say 'Yes' to equality, but with all their internal contradictions, I don't quite see what that is about. There is nothing concrete.

More generally, amongst parties that claim to be democrats, everyone calls for a revolution first, thinking that it's only after that the question of equality between men and women will arise. We say: "We have to organise right now!" Now that the elections are cancelled, if there's a National Conference or a Constituent Assembly, we want women to affirm their issues [probl matiques], and above all that they are represented and not by men. [3]

What does your feminist struggle mean?

When we talk about an egalitarian society, we need to know what we are talking about. Legally, there is equal pay; however, men hold the most important positions. Here, the right to abortion does not exist, and the mere fact of speaking about it exposes us to prison. After that, of course, there is the question of the woman's position in a capitalist system: she suffers precariousness and discrimination in domestic work, which is unpaid. I have a Marxist perspective, far from the more bourgeois positions that exist here, too.

For example, concerning the debate on inheritance: I am obviously for greater equality between men and women, but it is not an end in itself inheritance concerns relatively few people in Algeria. Concerning the question of the Family Code, or violence, laws must be changed, but so must mentalities. Some collectives do not do any work with women from populaire backgrounds. Here, we organise workshops in villages, we talk about domestic work, we bring up the question of childcare in factories or in state companies for now, the only one with a nursery is Sonatrach, the hydrocarbon company. Private nurseries are also very expensive: a woman can spend 70% of her salary there.

Do different generations find common ground in the collectives that you are a member of?

This is not a conflict between generations, but it is true that the new generation accuses the old one of not wanting to pass on the torch, which is not entirely wrong. That being said, it is important to reflect on the road traveled: the movement of the 1970s where women created a clandestine film club in Algiers, then that of the 1980s, which questioned the Family Code, have been crucial. In the 1990s, during the Black Decade, many activists were murdered or had to flee. Then in 2001, there was also the Berber movement. Not to forget of course, commitment during the revolution for independence.

There have been achievements. An older activist once told me that the fact that we dare to speak today about violence and harassment is already a huge thing.

PS:

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[1] Established in 1984, the Family Code is heavily criticised by many Algerian feminist associations. Dubbed the 'Code of Infamy', it keeps the woman as a legal minor for life, passing from the tutelage of the father to that of the husband. In 2005, a reform allowed some adjustments: polygamy became subject to the 'preliminary consent' of the first wife; marriage by proxy (which allowed forced marriages) was abolished; and the woman can henceforth remain in the family accommodation with the children, in case of separation.

[2] A human rights activist and defender of the Mozabite cause (Berber-speaking minority), he had already served, between 2015 to 2017, a two-year prison sentence, notably for "undermining the security of the state" and "disturbance of public order". On 31 March, he was incarcerated for "attacking institutions". Amnesty International had found his imprisonment "arbitrary and illegal".

[3] In early June, due to a lack of candidates, the Constitutional Council cancelled the presidential elections that were scheduled for 4 July following the resignation of Boutefliq. The mandate of the interim president has been extended for an indefinite period. A national conference of civil society for a way out of crisis [see here] took place in June, organised by associations and unions. They advocate, inter alia, a transition period, an independent commission to lead the elections and a 'national dialogue' with political actors, which should end with a 'national conference'.