

Ink of Empowerment: Moroccan Women's Unwritten Stories

Master's in Graphic Design – Dissertation

Candidate:
Saloua Rmita

Supervisor:
João Carlos de Jesus Pinto

Caldas da Rainha, March 2025

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Acknowledgments

This has been a journey, and I'm truly grateful for every part of it. First, thank you to my parents, my dad M'barek Rmita, my mom Fatiha Joudar, for their constant support and belief in me. To my siblings, thank you for being with me through all the trips and moments.

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To the women whose stories shaped this project, your voices are the heart of it all. To the associations, to lawyer Khadija Idrissi, and to everyone who played a part in this master's - thank you.

This project is for Morocco, Moroccan women, to
ALL WOMEN.

Abstract

Visual representation is a powerful tool for promoting empathy and understanding by associating symbols and images with narratives, thereby cultivating deeper emotional connections (Morgan, 2018).

This dissertation employs graphic design as a medium to challenge societal perceptions of Moroccan women and amplify their voices through accessible and purpose-driven storytelling.

The study examines the cultural norms, stereotypes, and systemic challenges shaping the lived experiences of Moroccan women. Using a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative interviews and cultural analyses, six case studies highlight shared struggles across diverse social, political, and economic contexts. These narratives highlight the enduring issues often silenced within Moroccan society and advocate for the reclamation of women's stories as a pivotal step toward societal transformation. Guided by decolonizing design principles, the project rejects colonial portrayals that have historically reduced Moroccan women to passive roles (Goh, 2021).

By incorporating culturally resonant design elements drawn from Moroccan heritage, the work establishes a visual language that both celebrates and empowers. The resulting storytelling initiative seeks to transform societal perspectives, offering a multifaceted and inclusive portrayal of Moroccan women's lived realities.

Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to both design studies and gender discourse by providing a structured framework for decolonized visual storytelling in Morocco.

Keywords: Women, Morocco, Empowerment, Cultural Dynamics, Decolonizing Design, Design Practices, Heritage.

Resumo

A representação visual é uma ferramenta poderosa para promover empatia e compreensão, ao associar símbolos e imagens a narrativas, cultivando conexões emocionais mais profundas (Morgan, 2018).

Esta dissertação utiliza o design gráfico como meio para desafiar percepções sociais sobre mulheres marroquinas e amplificar as suas vozes através de narrativas acessíveis e orientadas por um propósito. O estudo analisa as normas culturais, estereótipos e desafios sistêmicos que moldam as experiências vividas pelas mulheres marroquinas.

Através de uma abordagem de métodos mistos, incluindo entrevistas qualitativas e análises culturais, seis estudos de caso destacam desafios comuns em contextos sociais, políticos e económicos diversos. Estas narrativas evidenciam questões persistentes frequentemente silenciadas na sociedade marroquina e defendem a recuperação das histórias das mulheres como passo crucial para a transformação social. Guiado pelos princípios do design decolonial, o projeto rejeita as representações coloniais que historicamente reduziram as mulheres marroquinas a papéis passivos (Goh, 2021).

Ao incorporar elementos de design culturalmente relevantes inspirados no património marroquino, o trabalho estabelece uma linguagem visual que celebra e empodera. A iniciativa resultante procura transformar perspetivas sociais, oferecendo um retrato multifacetado e inclusivo das realidades vividas pelas mulheres marroquinas.

Por fim, esta dissertação contribui tanto para os estudos de design quanto para o discurso de género, oferecendo um enquadramento estruturado para uma narrativa visual descolonizada em Marrocos.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres, Marrocos, Empoderamento, Dinâmicas Culturais, Descolonização do Design, Práticas de Design, Património.

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Glossary

Anthropology

The study of human societies, cultures, and their development over time.

Authentic

Design that genuinely reflects a culture's values, symbols, or traditions without distortion or appropriation.

Cultural Apparatus

Systems and structures that shape cultural production and societal behavior.

EI-Houzz

A rural region in Morocco involved in women's empowerment initiatives.

Eurocentric

Centering European values and perspectives while marginalizing others.

Folk

Relating to the traditional culture, stories, art, or practices of a community, often passed down through generations.

Haik

A traditional North African garment made of a large white cloth, draped to cover the body and head, often worn by women for modesty and cultural identity.

Hammam

A traditional Moroccan public bathhouse used for cleansing, relaxation, and social rituals.

High Atlas Foundation

A Moroccan NGO supporting sustainable development, especially in rural areas.

Hchouma

A graphic novel by Zainab Fasiki addressing gender, shame, and taboos in Moroccan society.

Movement Masaktach

Masaktach (Arabic for "I will not be silent") is a Moroccan feminist and digital activism movement that emerged in 2018 following widespread outrage over gender-based violence, particularly after the viral #MeToo movement. It gained momentum when a young woman named Khadija publicly shared her harrowing story of rape and abuse, prompting a wave of online solidarity. Masaktach uses social media platforms to amplify women's voices, report harassment, and challenge cultural taboos around sexual violence.

Motif

A recurring visual element in art or design with cultural or symbolic meaning.

Moudawana

The Moroccan Family Code that governs family-related matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, with reforms aimed at improving women's rights.

Postcolonial Theory

A framework analyzing the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies, especially in formerly colonized regions.

Shwafa

A traditional Moroccan fortune teller, often consulted for spiritual guidance, healing, or insight into personal matters.

Zellige

A traditional Moroccan mosaic tilework made from individually chiseled geometric tiles, often forming intricate patterns.

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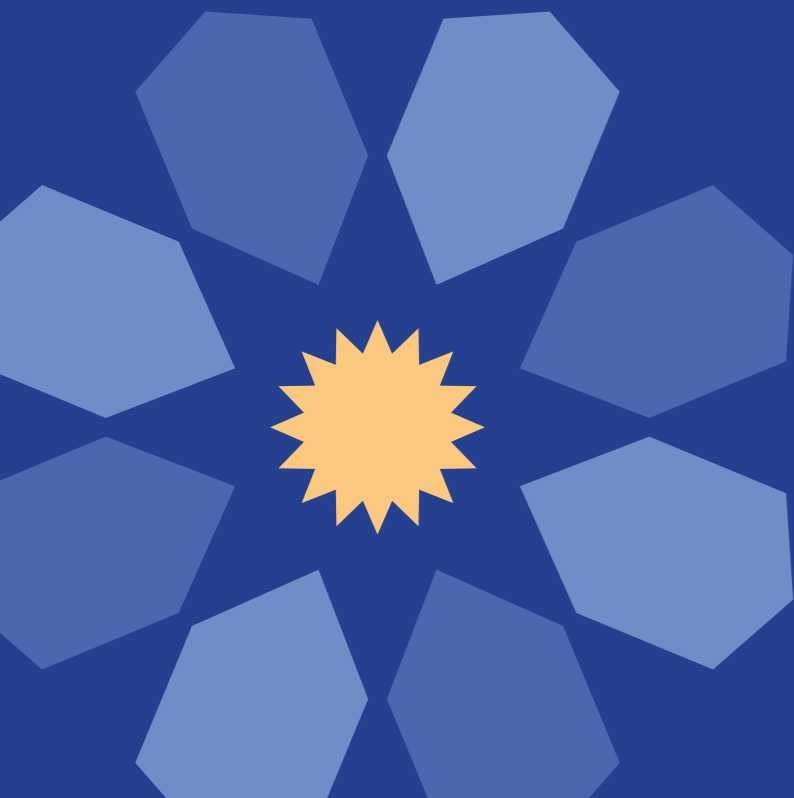
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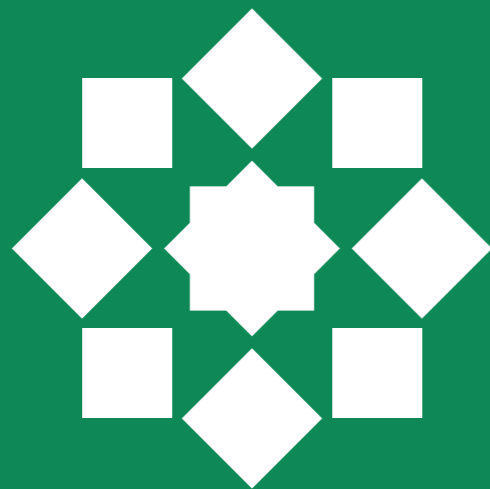
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Chapter 01



Introduction

- 1.1 Problem Statement
- 1.2 Objectives and Research Questions
- 1.3 Contextual Background

Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

As a Moroccan woman, my identity has been profoundly shaped by the vibrant cultural milieu of my homeland. From a young age, I roamed across Morocco, immersing myself in the diverse constellation of traditions, communities, and landscapes that define the nation. This kaleidoscope of contrasts and shared values has always captivated me, yet alongside its richness, I have long sensed a profound dissonance, an acute awareness of the obstacles Moroccan women confront in our society.

Over the past eight years, after relocating abroad, my exposure to Western media and global perspectives has sharpened my perception of the chasm between international portrayals of Moroccan women and the nuanced realities I experienced back home. Frequently, these depictions reduce Moroccan women to simplistic stereotypes, neglecting the resilience, autonomy, and layered complexity that characterize their lives. Equally striking is the universality of women's struggles, which manifest differently in distinct cultural contexts yet trace back to shared threads of misrepresentation and marginalization.

This realization sparked the central aim of my research, to highlight on the multifaceted narratives of Moroccan women, stories intimately rooted in my own heritage yet reflective of a broader cultural, religious, and artistic history. Through this dissertation, I strive not merely to critique oversimplified Western projections, but to paint a more faithful portrait that highlights the depth and tenacity of Moroccan women's experiences.

By leveraging the expressive power of graphic design, I seek to magnify their voices, reframe their narratives, and instigate a richer, more authentic discussion about gender, culture, and representation.

Far from being a purely academic pursuit, this project resonates as a personal mission to honor the fortitude of Moroccan women, confront the silences imposed upon them, and craft a counter-narrative that affirms their agency in the face of societal challenges. Through this research, I hope to reshape the prevailing discourse and illuminate the transformative potential of Moroccan women's stories, both as a challenge to pervasive stereotypes and as a catalyst for meaningful, inclusive change.



Figure 1. The author in front of a traditional carpet from Imlil village in the high Atlas Mountains of Morocco. The intricate Moroccan geometric motifs reflect the cultural visual language explored throughout this thesis.

1.2 Objectives and Research Questions

The primary objective of this research is to explore how decolonized graphic design can influence societal perceptions of Moroccan women, ultimately empowering them to reclaim their stories.

Main Research Question:

How does the decolonization of design influence societal perceptions of Moroccan women, particularly concerning the challenges and narratives shaped by cultural norms and stereotypes?

Sub-Questions:

1. In what ways do current graphic design practices in Morocco reinforce or challenge existing cultural norms and stereotypes about women?
2. How can decolonized design methodologies foster more empowering narratives for Moroccan women?
3. What cultural, institutional, and economic barriers limit the adoption of decolonized design methodologies in Morocco, especially in the visual representation of women?

1.3 Contextual Background

Decolonization in design refers to an evolving critical framework that questions how historical colonial power structures have shaped visual culture, communication, and design education. Although the concept of decolonization itself arises from postcolonial theory in fields such as history, literature, and anthropology, its application to design has only recently gained broader recognition. Scholars and practitioners have begun examining how Eurocentric paradigms dominate contemporary design practices, often at the expense of indigenous or non-Western artistic expressions. By understanding this historical trajectory, my research situates itself within a growing movement that aims to reclaim cultural authenticity in design and to challenge dominant narratives about Moroccan women.

The inspiration for this project originated from a transformative journey through the High Atlas Mountains in 2018 (Figure 3). I became involved with the High Atlas Foundation after attending a local community event aimed at supporting women's cooperatives. Conversations with the foundation's organizers revealed a shared commitment to empowering women in remote areas of El-Houzz (Figure 2,4) by providing resources for education, agriculture, and economic development. During this experience, I was able to witness firsthand the social and cultural barriers these women navigate, reinforcing my desire to advocate for their stories and to integrate their perspectives into my research.



Figure 2. Field Research, El Houzz, Morocco
Photograph taken by High Atlas Foundation



Figure 3. Logo of High Atlas
Foundation
Official logo



Figure 4. Women weaving traditional
carpets, Imlil Region, Morocco
Photograph taken by the author

Building on this inspiration, the project adopts a decolonizing design approach to dismantle the power structures historically entrenched in graphic design practices. By rejecting external, often Western-centric interpretations of Moroccan culture, this research centers the stories and perspectives of Moroccan women. The project employs symbols (Figure 5-6), motifs (Figure 7), and storytelling techniques deeply rooted in Moroccan cultural heritage to create a visual narrative that authentically represents and empowers these women. Deconstructing the Moroccan cultural apparatus in relation to the feminine can be challenging. To address this complexity, I draw on the feminist activism of Zainab Fasiki (Figure 8), and the legal advocacy of Khadija Al-Idrissi (Figure 9). Fasiki's work, particularly her book *Hchouma* (Fasiki, 2020), critiques societal norms and highlights the potential of graphic design as a tool for challenging taboos and fostering open dialogue about gender and sexuality. She serves as a critical lens through which I can explore feminist expressions in visual form, supplementing my own voice with hers. Meanwhile, Al-Idrissi's work in legislative reform emphasizes the intersection of activism and systemic change, further contextualizing the challenges faced by Moroccan women and demonstrating why broad social transformation requires multiple forms of engagement.

This research employs a comprehensive approach, incorporating qualitative and quantitative methods, including in-depth interviews and cultural analyses. Participants from diverse backgrounds, including urban and rural communities, varying socio-economic classes, and different age groups, offer a multidimensional understanding of Moroccan women's experiences.

Furthermore, the cultural analysis examines how art, tradition, and community influence gender roles and expectations. By grounding this study in a decolonized framework, the research aims to enhance meaningful discussions about gender equality and social justice in Morocco.

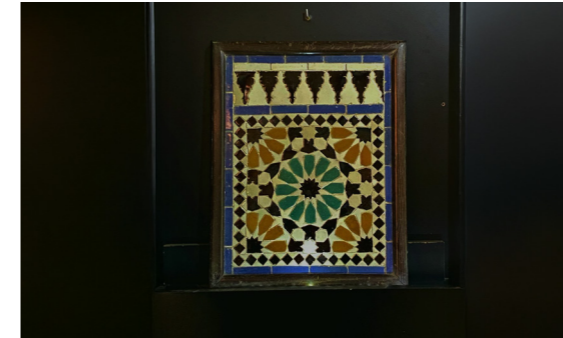


Figure 5. Moroccan geometric zellij from the Ethnographic Museum of Chefchaouen
Photograph taken by the author

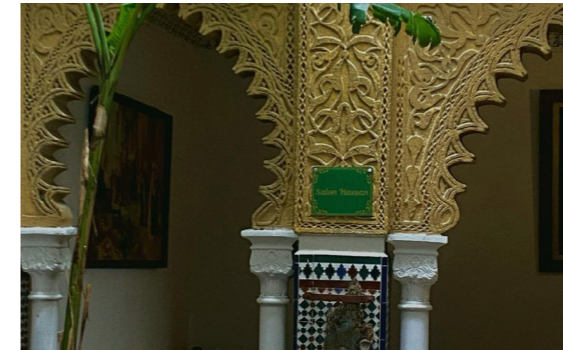


Figure 6. Andalusian architectural symbols from Continental Hotel, Tangier
Photograph taken by the author



Figure 7. Moroccan Islamic geometric motifs, Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca
Photograph taken by the author

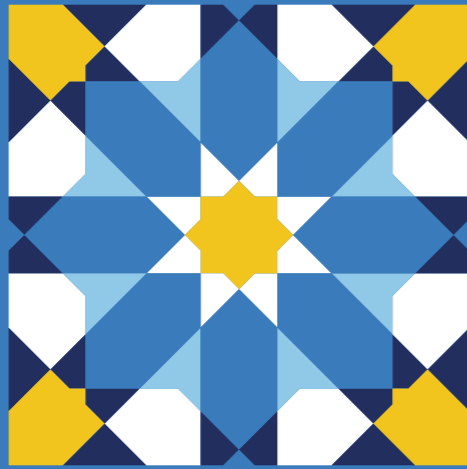


Figure 8. Zainab Fasiki
Photograph © AFP



Figure 9. Khadija El Idrissi
Photograph provided by Khadija El Idrissi

Chapter 02



Theoretical Foundations

- 2.1 Decolonization in Graphic Design
- 2.2 Feminism in the Moroccan Context

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Decolonization in Graphic Design

a. Overview of Theoretical Foundations

Rooted in postcolonial theory, critical race studies, and indigenous scholarship, decolonization in graphic design examines how colonial power structures continue to shape cultural production and knowledge systems beyond political independence (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

By dismantling Eurocentric aesthetics and empowering marginalized voices, designers can forge more inclusive visual narratives (Hall, 1997).

In Morocco, these principles intersect with the nation's history under French rule (1912–1956), when visual culture from architecture to advertising was a tool for enforcing French norms. This legacy highlights why decolonizing design is essential for Moroccan practitioners seeking to reclaim cultural narratives and challenge ongoing colonial influences.

b. French Colonial Influence on Moroccan Design

During the French Protectorate in Morocco (1912–1956), the colonial administration endeavored to “modernize” local visual culture through official campaigns and urban planning (Hoisington, 2005).

As shown in Figure 10,11, standardized signage in Arabic and French served not merely as a practical accessibility measure but also as a tangible symbol of French linguistic and cultural dominance (Chtatou, 2019). Meanwhile, Figure 12 illustrates how museums, schools, and other government institutions were likewise labeled in bilingual formats, reflecting a broader strategy to embed French norms in Moroccan public life.



Figure 10. Traditional Moroccan signage in both Arabic and French
Photograph by Bencito the Traveller, Flickr



Figure 11. Contemporary Moroccan signage in both Arabic and French
Image source: Alamy, used for academic purposes only



Figure 12. Bilingual signage at the Bank Al-Maghrib Museum
Photograph by Ann Logue

**“French colonial branding in Morocco was more than mere advertising; it was a deliberate exercise of power, shaping how Moroccans perceived themselves and their relationship to France.”
El Haddad (2020)**

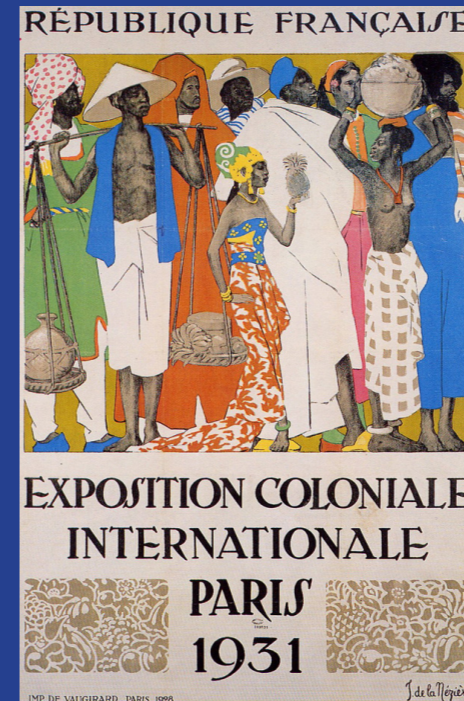


Figure 13. Poster from L'Exposition Coloniale Internationale (1931) showcasing Africans in a vibrant, exotic illustration style
Lithographic poster by Joseph de La Nézière. Source: Artorigo, used for academic purposes only.

Such visual strategies, tightly bound to French governance, established a hierarchy of aesthetics that deemed European styles “modern” and Moroccan or indigenous visual forms “folk” or “traditional.” This dynamic persisted after independence, as many Moroccan designers were trained in institutions modeled on French art and design schools (Berrada, 2017). Consequently, Eurocentric color palettes, typography, and stylistic norms still frequently overshadow local visual expressions in contemporary Moroccan design. Figure 13, a poster from L'Exposition coloniale internationale (1931) typifies the romanticized portrayal of Morocco for French audiences: This illustration epitomizes the romanticized portrayal of Morocco as an exotic, controlled backdrop intended for French consumption.

2.1.2 Decolonizing Design from Historical Legacies to Contemporary Practice

a. Defining Decolonization in Graphic Design

Following independence, Moroccan artists and designers began gradually to reassert their cultural identity by integrating local motifs, Arabic calligraphy, and references to Amazigh (Berber) art into posters, magazines, and book covers (Rerhaye, 2018). Yet true decolonization involves more than reclaiming style or motifs; it calls for a critical reevaluation of the power relations embedded in design processes and educational structures (Freire, 1970; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

b. Contemporary Decolonization Efforts in Moroccan Graphic Design

In Morocco, several contemporary artists and designers have contributed to **“visual decolonization”** by challenging Orientalist tropes and making space for local narratives.

For instance, Hassan Hajjaj (Figure 14) often referred to as the **“Andy Warhol of Marrakech”** fuses pop art with Moroccan textiles, patterns, and Arabic type to subvert Western brand appropriation and reassert Moroccan cultural identity (Tate Modern, 2019) as in Figure 15, 16.

His vibrant photography, such as the **“Kesh Angels”** 4 series, juxtaposes Moroccan women in traditional attire with bold, global pop culture references, challenging both Western stereotypes and local gender norms such as the example in Figure 17.



Figure 17. Kesh Angels (2010), inspired by martial arts movies Photograph by Hassan Hajjaj, of Vigo Gallery.



Figure 14. Portrait of Hassan Hajjaj Source: 193 Gallery.

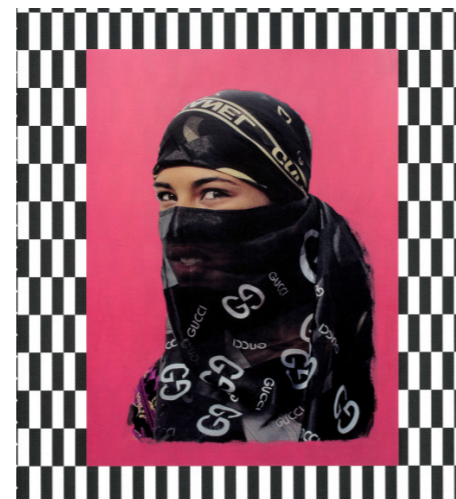


Figure 15. Artwork by Hassan Hajjaj Source: The Library Project.



Figure 16. ALO WALA (2015) by Hassan Hajjaj, from the My Rockstars series Source: ALO WALA.

Additionally, Zineb Benjelloun (Figure 18) employs bold graphic techniques in her zines and illustrations, exploring themes of gender, identity, and resistance (Figure 19, 20).

Her work often integrates hand-drawn elements with digital design, blending Moroccan cultural motifs with contemporary graphic styles to question societal norms and amplify marginalized voices. Visual references like Hajjaj’s bold, colorful frames, Benjelloun’s dynamic zine illustrations exemplify how Moroccan graphic designers are reclaiming and redefining visual narratives. These artists are not only resisting colonial legacies but also fostering spaces for authentic Moroccan voices within contemporary design landscapes.

“Decolonizing visual culture in Morocco demands the development of new methods and spaces of creation; ones that resist appropriation and hold space for local narratives to unfold on their own terms.”; Rerhaye (2018) These examples emphasize how Moroccan designers and artists are bridging the gap between heritage and innovation adopting a critical lens on tradition while also experimenting with new media.

In results, they highlight the fluid, evolving nature of Moroccan identity rather than a static “authentic” past.



Figure 18. Portrait of Zineb Benjelloun Photograph by Cité internationale des arts, Paris



Figure 19. Illustration by Zineb Benjelloun for Darna, part of the “Warata” comic series Source: avoir-alire.com.



Figure 20. Illustration by Zineb Benjelloun Source: Artist’s Behance account

2.1.3 Relating Decolonization to This Project

a. Why Decolonizing Design Matters for Moroccan Women's Narratives

The catalyst for decolonizing design within this project arises from the recognition that visual representations hold the power to shape public perceptions of Moroccan women's identities and experiences. Colonial-era imagery often objectified or oversimplified local women, casting them as exotic curiosities or as passive figures lacking agency (Said, 1978).

By contrast, a decolonizing approach seeks to empower women's voices their personal stories, cultural knowledge, and social realities, so that they define how they are seen and understood.

Rather than relying on external interpretations or reinforcing stereotypes, this project privileges first-person narratives and translates them visually through a process guided by women's own preferences, concerns, and cultural references.

In doing so, it extends the work of creatives like Hassan Hajjaj and Zineb Benjelloun to a more intimate, narrative-centered realm, building on their call to deconstruct colonial influences and celebrate Moroccan cultural fluidity.

b. Bridging Tradition, Minimalism, and Empowerment

One potential tension emerges when discussing minimalist design strategies. While Minimalism has historically been associated with Western modernist movements (Bishop, 2017), it is employed here strategically to keep the focus on women's stories. Some scholars note that Western minimalism, originating in the 20th century as an aesthetic response to abstraction or expressionism, can perpetuate Eurocentric ideals if uncritically adopted. However, in this project, minimalism serves not as a Western import but as a localized reimagining of simplicity, rooted in Moroccan design traditions and motivated by the intention to bridge so-called "modern" and "traditional" forms.

Instead of simply adopting Western trends, this approach anchors minimalism in the Moroccan tradition of geometric abstraction, such as zellige.

To highlight women's narratives, the design selectively pares down visual elements while incorporating patterns and Arabic calligraphy inspired by the visual identity of Moroccan cities. Taking Chefchaouen (Figure 22) as an example, the city's distinctive blue and white tones are carefully chosen to shape the color palette, reflecting its coastal ambiance and cultural essence. Moreover, geometric shapes and patterns commonly found in Chefchaouen's architecture are integrated throughout the narratives, maintaining visual coherence and reinforcing the city's unique aesthetic (Figure 21-26).

This strategy offers a way to contrast traditional Moroccan motifs with a pared-down aesthetic, ensuring that "less is more" does not lead to a loss of cultural specificity.

A preliminary illustration, for instance, merges the iconic tessellations of zellige with a subdued two-tone palette, emphasizing the intricate lines and angles characteristic of Moroccan architecture. By removing extraneous details, the design draws attention to the underlying stories of women's resilience in Chefchaouen's community spaces.

It is important to note that the present discussion serves as a preview, foreshadowing a more extensive examination of how minimalism is woven into the practical design process in Chapter 6 (see Section 6.1.3). That chapter will elaborate on the methods, color choices, and cultural references that inform each design decision, as well as address critiques suggesting that minimalism could be perceived as a continuation of Western-centric aesthetics. By clarifying its Moroccan-inflected foundations and creative rationale here, minimalism can be understood to accentuate, rather than diminish, the local identities and narratives central to this research.

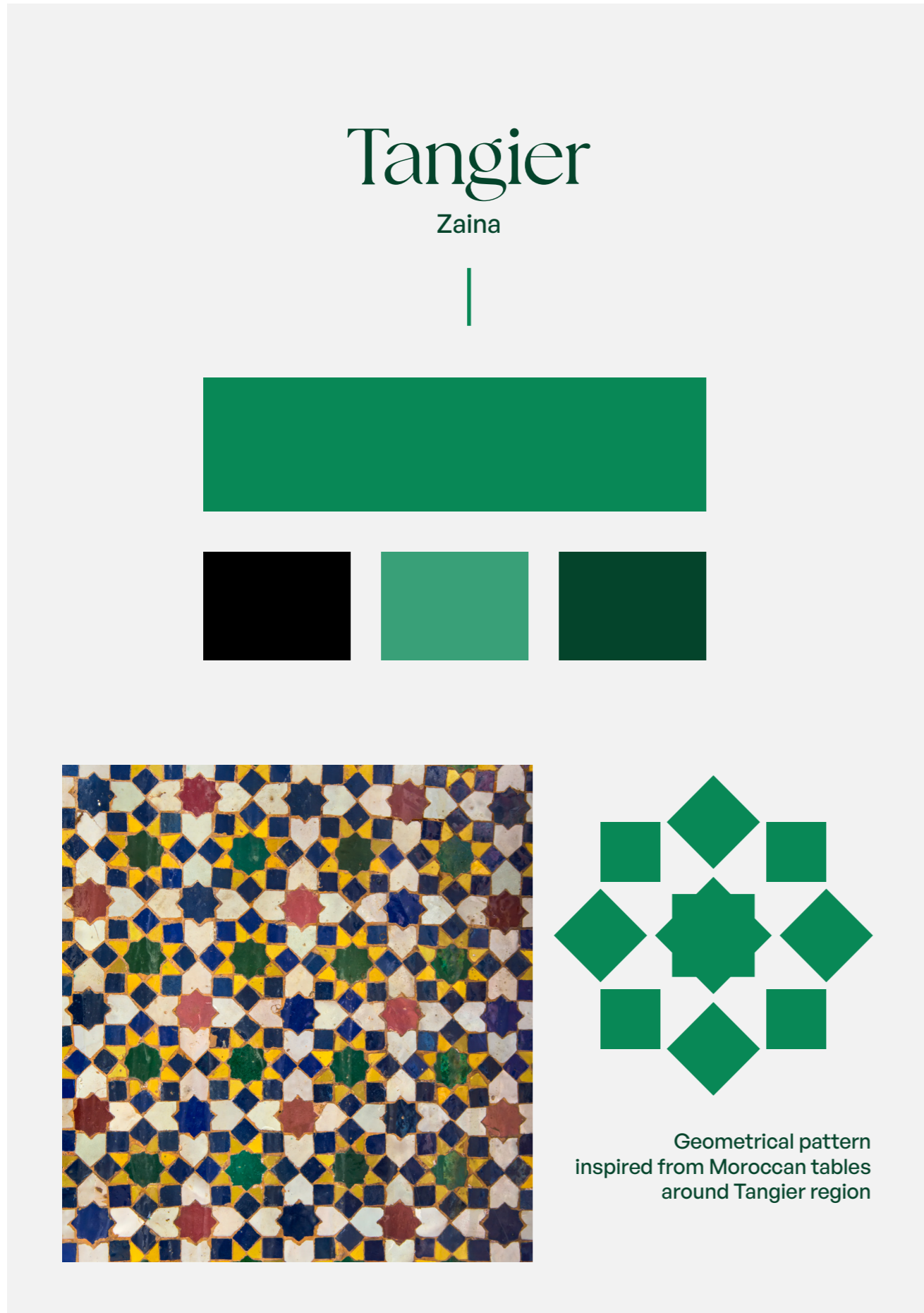


Figure 21. Moodboard of color selection and geometric inspiration from the Tangier region, Author's composition



Figure 22. Moodboard of color selection and geometric inspiration from the Chefchaouen region, Author's composition

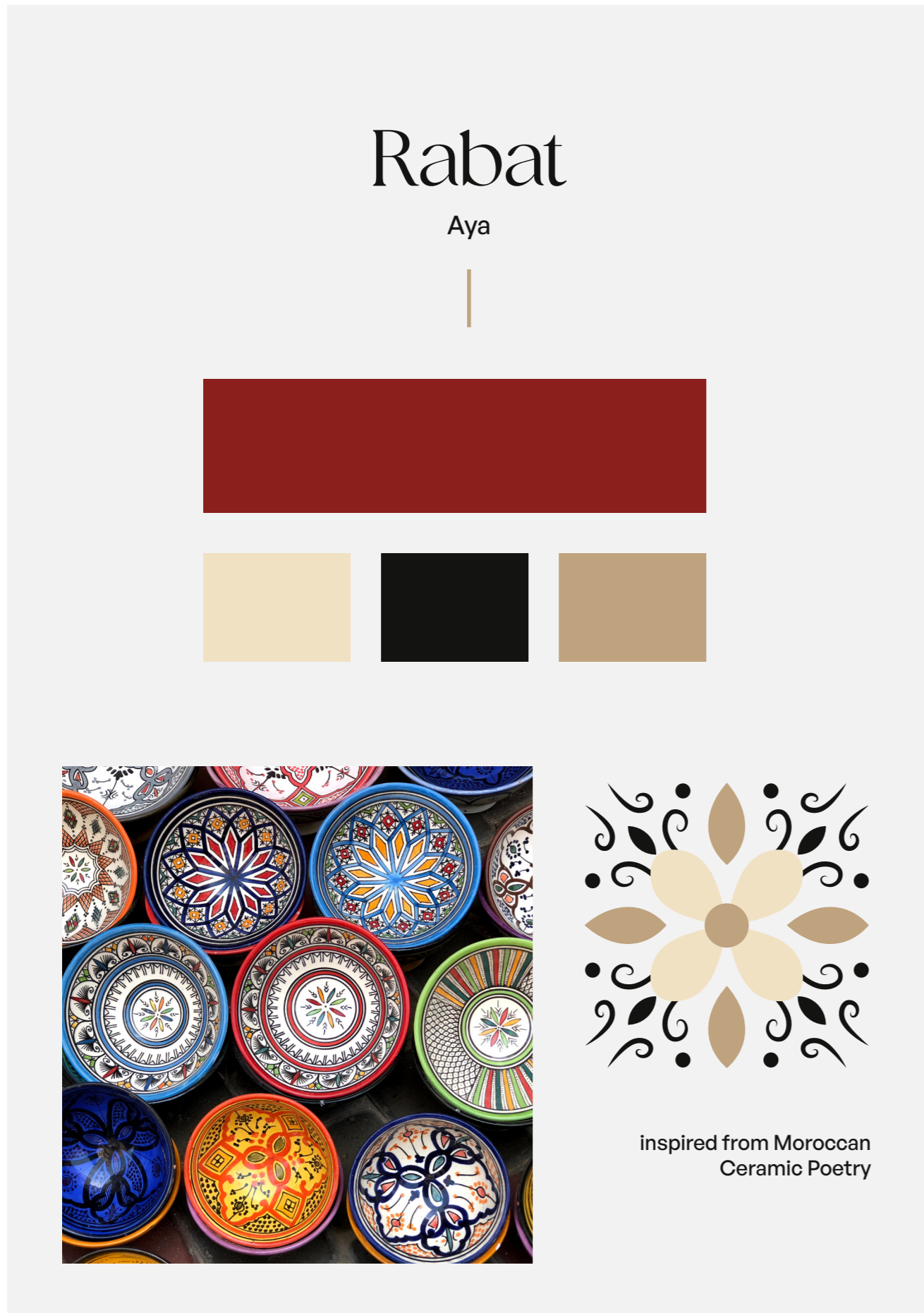


Figure 23. Moodboard of color selection and geometric inspiration from the Rabat region. Author's composition

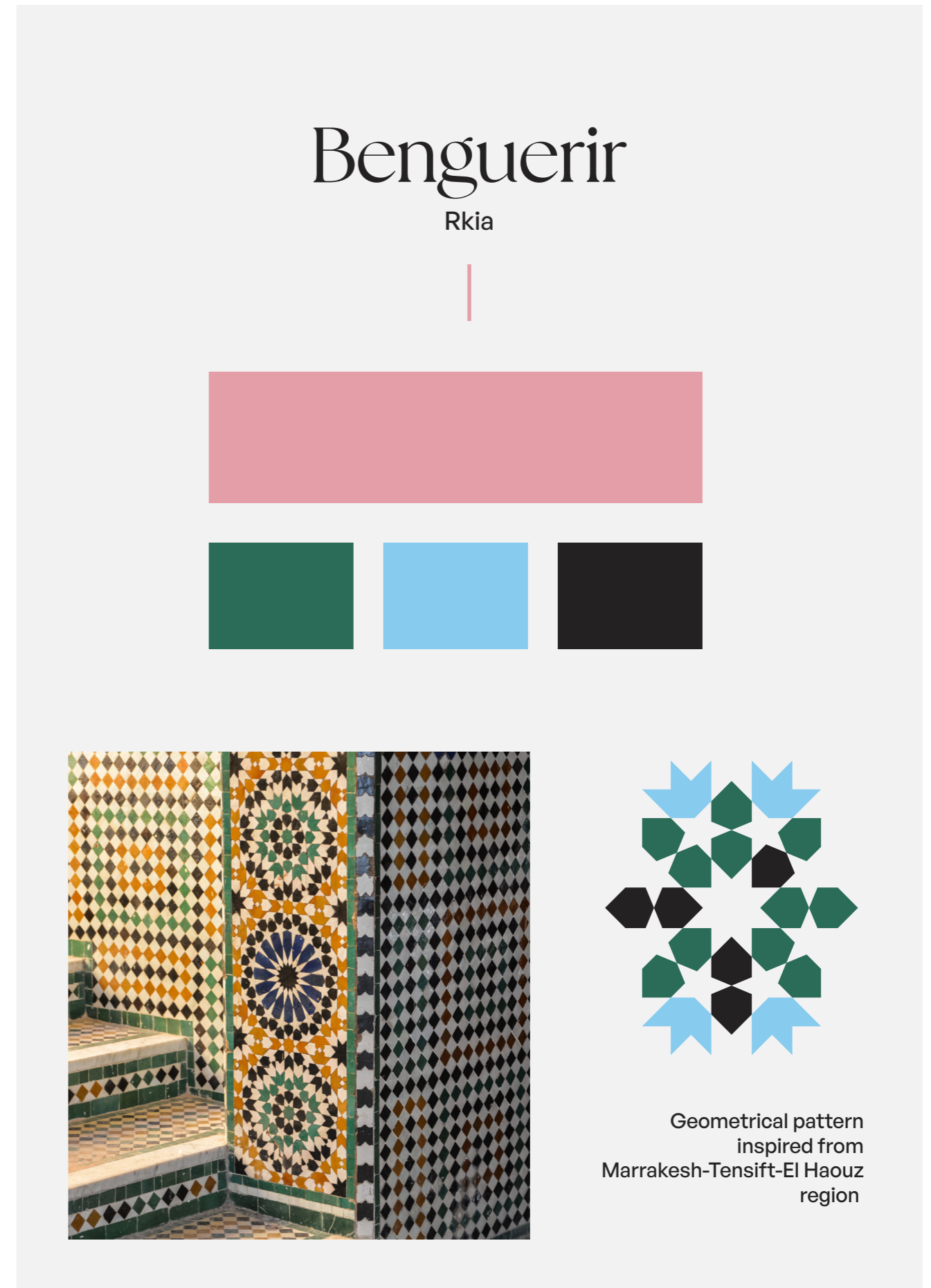


Figure 24. Moodboard of color selection and geometric inspiration from the Benguerir region. Author's composition

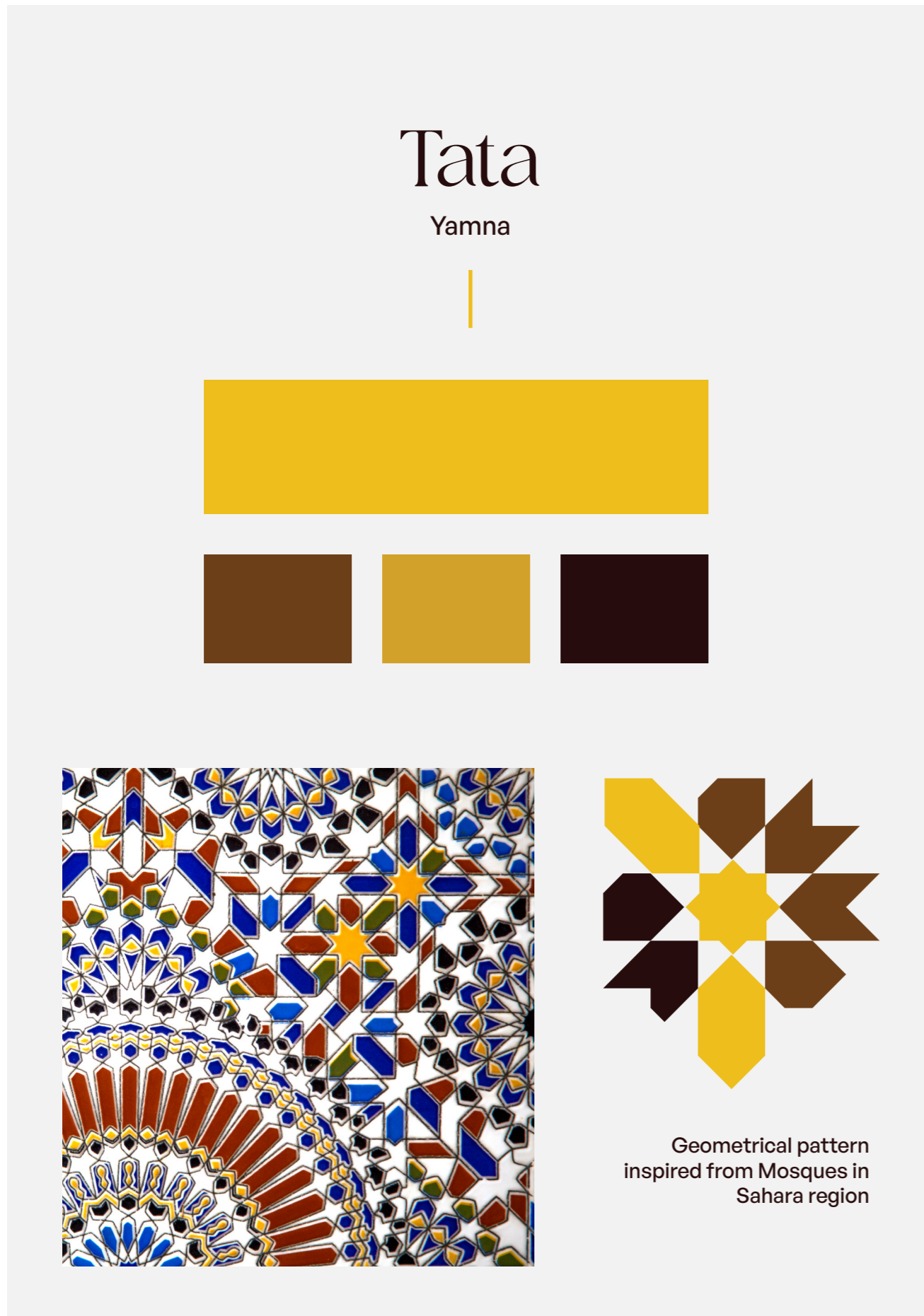


Figure 25. Moodboard of color selection and geometric inspiration from the Tata region. Author's composition



Figure 26. Moodboard of color selection and geometric inspiration from the El Aiun region. Author's composition

2.2 Feminism in the Moroccan Context

Although this study recognizes the significant role international feminist movements have played in shaping Moroccan feminist activism, it intentionally emphasizes localized narratives often overshadowed in global feminist discourse. Historically, influential indigenous, Arab, and Muslim women, such as Fatima Al-Fihriye (Figure 29) who founded Al-Qarawiyyin university (Figure 27, 28), the world's oldest continuously operating university, in 859 AD preceded the emergence of modern feminism, typically dated to the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Offenhauer, 2005; Rayyan, 2025). Such pioneering women have frequently been marginalized or excluded from mainstream feminist histories.

This study prioritizes these earlier narratives, exploring how the historical contributions of Moroccan women established foundational perspectives on women's empowerment long before the advent of modern feminist movements. Drawing from these findings, this dissertation aims to enrich conventional feminist perspectives, highlighting indigenous manifestations of women's agency. While Moroccan feminism is deeply rooted in local historical and cultural contexts, it has never been isolated from broader global feminist movements.



Figure 27. Exterior view of Al-Qarawiyyin University, Fez
Source: Embassy of Morocco in China.

Since the post-independence period, Moroccan activists have engaged with Francophone and pan-Arab feminist discourses, integrating ideas about women's liberation disseminated through international conferences, academic exchanges, and media (Kandiyoti, 1991; Mir-Hosseini, 2002). The United Nations International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City (1975), for instance, served as a critical platform where Moroccan delegates exchanged strategies with activists from diverse regions, aiming to challenge patriarchal and colonial legacies (United Nations, 1975; Mohanty, 1984). This momentum continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s as Moroccan women's organizations built transnational networks with European and North African feminist groups, exchanging practices for legal advocacy and social mobilization (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2006).

Although external influences supplemented rather than supplanted local realities, they provided essential tools for confronting intersections between patriarchy and colonial histories. This synergy between local and global activism laid the foundation for the distinctive waves of Moroccan feminism that continue to evolve (Sadiqi, 2003).



Figure 28. Interior of the Al-Qarawiyyin University library
Source: Face2Face Africa.



Figure 29. Portrait of Fatima al-Fihri
Image from Wikipedia.

Transition from Decolonizing Design to Feminist Perspectives

Decolonizing design critiques colonial legacies in aesthetics, systems, and knowledge production, while feminist theory challenges entrenched patriarchal structures. Together, these frameworks reveal how colonial histories and gender inequalities intersect—shaping the representation of Moroccan women and often controlling their narratives (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 1988; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Recognizing this intersection enables a more nuanced exploration of how Moroccan feminism has evolved in response to both external colonial forces and internal cultural expectations. Figure 30 visually maps key milestones in Moroccan feminist movements, from the French Protectorate era to contemporary developments up to 2024.

2.2.1 Waves of Moroccan Feminism: Key Highlights

Post-Independence Feminism: Evolution Through Waves

Since Morocco's independence in 1956, feminism has evolved through distinct waves, each shaped by significant social, political, and cultural transformations. These waves represent a progression from initial struggles for basic rights towards contemporary digital activism and intersectional advocacy. This progression is visually summarized in Figure 30, highlighting key milestones in Moroccan feminism from independence to 2024.

Before examining these modern waves, it is crucial to acknowledge historical female leadership predating formal feminist movements.

A prominent example is Fatima Al-Fihriye, who founded the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez in the 9th century, widely recognized as the world's oldest continuously operating university.

Her pioneering role in advancing education highlights the longstanding tradition of women's intellectual and social influence in Moroccan society, a central theme of this research.

Moroccan feminism has unfolded primarily through three major waves (Figure 30):

- **First Wave (1956–1980s):** Focused on securing fundamental rights, including access to education and public participation, influenced significantly by intellectuals like Fatima Mernissi and organizations such as the Union de l'Action Féminine (UAF).
- **Second Wave (1980s–2004):** Addressed systemic reforms, culminating in the landmark 2004 Moudawana reform, which significantly improved women's legal rights concerning marriage, divorce, and child custody.
- **Contemporary Wave (2004–Present):** Characterized by digital activism, intersectional approaches, and ongoing legal advocacy, including influential movements like #Masaktach and prominent activists such as Khadija Al-Idrissi. By contextualizing these waves against the historical contributions of figures like Fatima Al-Fihriye, we recognize the deep rooted agency of Moroccan women. This narrative underscores women's continuous role in shaping social, educational, and legal progress a foundational aspect of this project.

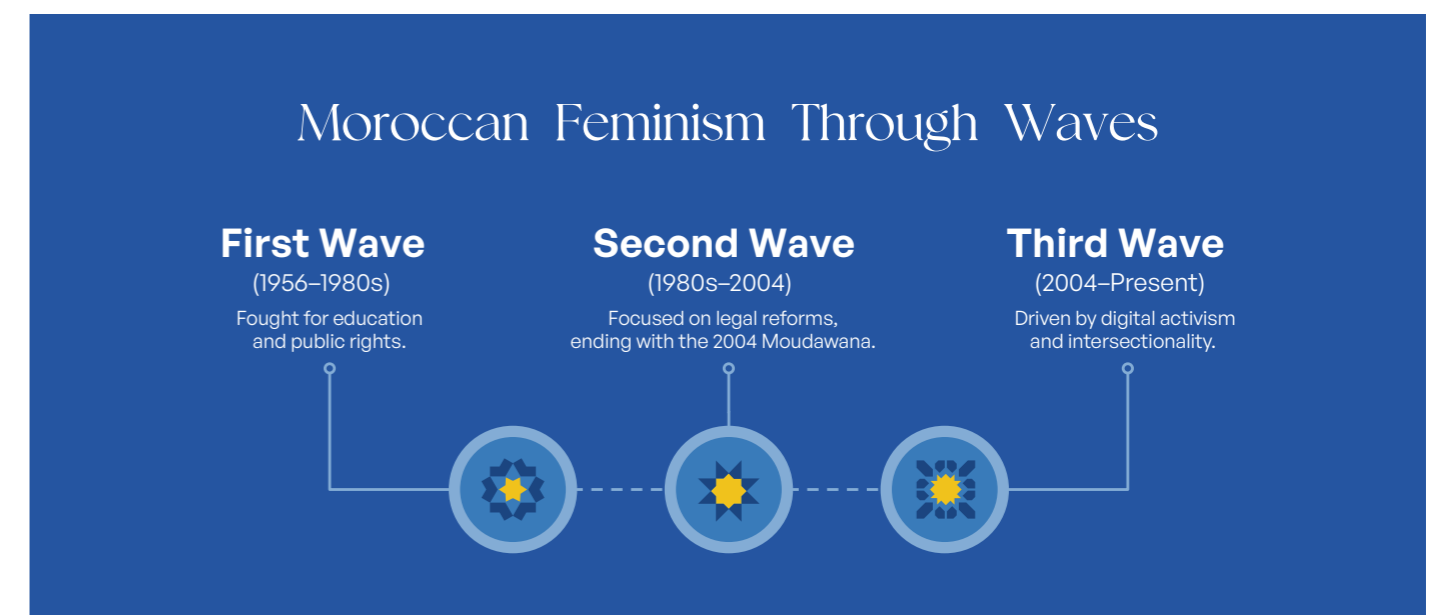


Figure 30. Evolution of feminist activism in Morocco
Visual timeline by the author

First Wave: Education and Basic Rights

Following independence in 1956, Moroccan feminism developed in waves, each reflecting shifting social, political, and cultural conditions. The first wave focused on education and basic rights, emphasizing women's literacy and public participation. A key intellectual figure here was Fatima Mernissi (Figure 31), whose works, including *Beyond the Veil* (1987) (Figure 32) and *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993) (Figure 33), challenged colonial stereotypes and patriarchal interpretations of Islam. Mernissi argued that women's subjugation in Morocco was not an inevitable byproduct of religion but rather a social construct shaped by intersecting political, economic, and cultural forces (Mernissi, 1991). Her scholarship inspired a generation of Moroccan feminists to question both colonial narratives and local patriarchal structures. During this period, organizations like the Union de l'Action Féminine (UAF), founded in the 1980s, pushed for legislative reforms and increased social awareness. Their advocacy was instrumental in sparking debates around the Moudawana, or the family code, and mobilizing the public in support of legal equity (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2006).



Figure 31. Portrait of Fatima Mernissi
Source: Islamic Pasts, Islamic Futures.

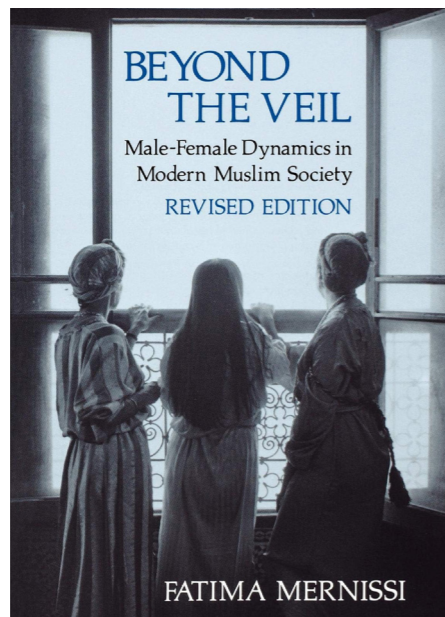


Figure 32. Book cover of *Beyond the Veil* by Fatima Mernissi
Source: Amazon.

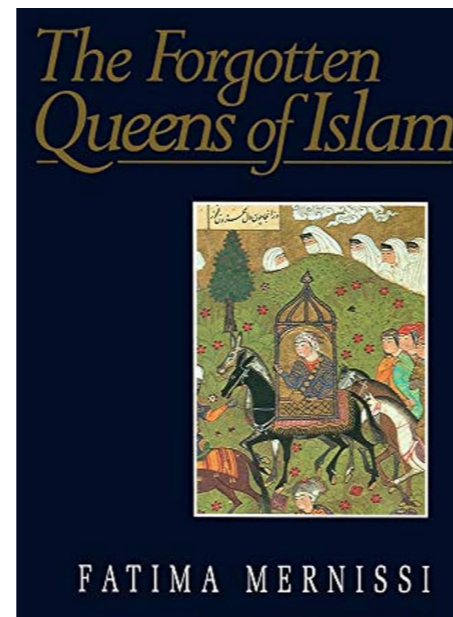


Figure 33. Book cover of *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* by Fatima Mernissi
Source: Goodreads.

Second Wave: Systemic Reforms and the Moudawana

By the 1980s and 1990s, feminism in Morocco expanded to address systemic inequalities and more comprehensive reforms, including gender-based violence and political representation (Sadiqi, 2003). A watershed moment of this second wave was the 2004 reform of the Moudawana, which afforded women enhanced rights in marriage, divorce, and child custody. This legal milestone marked a substantial shift in public discourse around women's rights, signaling the possibility of aligning cultural norms with progressive legislation.

“Moroccan feminists showcased how religious tenets could be interpreted in ways that champion women’s empowerment, rejecting reductive views that pitted Islam against modernity.” Charrad (2001)

Charrad's statement refers to the way Moroccan feminists engaged with Islamic teachings and traditions not as inherently oppositional to women's rights, but as a rich source that could be reinterpreted in more egalitarian ways. Rather than viewing Islam and modernity as two opposing forces, these feminists argued that Islamic texts and practices could and should be reexamined to reflect principles of justice, equality, and empowerment for women. This approach rejects the simplistic idea that progress must come from purely secular or Western models. Instead, it highlights that legal and social reforms can be grounded in Islamic principles if those principles are interpreted through a lens that values women's rights and seeks to expand their participation in society.

This strategy allowed Moroccan feminists to advocate for change in a way that resonated with broad segments of the population and maintained cultural legitimacy, illustrating that “**modern**” values and Islamic faith need not be mutually exclusive.

Contemporary Wave: Digital Activism, Intersectionality, and Legal Advocacy

The current wave of Moroccan feminism emerging in the 2000s and beyond is characterized by digital activism, grassroots organizing, and a deepening commitment to intersectionality¹⁰ (Sadiqi, 2014). Social media platforms have become powerful avenues for young activists, artists, and scholars to question entrenched gender norms and amplify marginalized voices. Instagram accounts like JatWjabt (Figure 36), MachiRojola (Figure 34), and Moroccan Outlaws (Figure 35) encourage women to share personal stories of discrimination and advocate for legal reforms (MachiRojola, 2021; JatWjabt, 2021; Moroccan Outlaws, n.d.).



Figure 34. MachiRojola campaign illustration
An Instagram campaign that challenges pervasive macho culture in Morocco, MachiRojola provides a platform for women to share personal stories and speak out against gender-based discrimination.
Source: Alfusaic.



Figure 35. Logo of Moroccan Outlaws (Collectif 490)
Source: DevelopmentAid.



Figure 36. JatWjabt: Feminist platform revolutionizing digital activism in Morocco. Photograph by Sara Zouiten.

Parallel to online activism, legal advocates like Khadija Al-Idrissi have worked to translate feminist demands into concrete policy changes. Al-Idrissi, both a lawyer and activist, leads efforts at Shorouk, a shelter and listening center that addresses issues ranging from sexual harassment to child protection (Radio France Internationale [RFI], 2024).

Her critique of existing laws; particularly within the Moudawana highlights the need to bridge the gap between policy reforms and cultural shifts.

“There are certain laws within the Moudawana that must be readdressed to align with the realities of women’s lives and ensure their rights are fully protected.” Khadija Al-Idrissi (RFI, 2024)

Such activism reflects a holistic strategy: while legislative reforms are crucial, cultural attitudes must evolve in parallel for meaningful, lasting change.

Consequently, Moroccan feminists today are simultaneously engaged in policy advocacy, grassroots empowerment, and media campaigns; including visual storytelling and design; to challenge patriarchal and colonial power structures. Feminism in Morocco is inextricably linked to the broader project of decolonization, challenging Western-centric frameworks that often dominate discussions of women’s rights in the Global South (Mohanty, 1984; Mernissi, 1991; Sadiqi, 2003). A decolonized Moroccan feminism asserts the primacy of local histories, religious interpretations, and communal practices in shaping women’s identities and aspirations.

Chapter 03



Case Study: Zainab Fasiki

3.1 Fasiki's Work and Influence

3.2 Integration with the Project

3. Case Study: Zainab Fasiki

Zainab Fasiki (b. 1994) is a Moroccan artist, illustrator, and activist whose work has been recognized for its focus on gender equality, women's rights, and social justice (Fasiki, 2019; Mohanty, 1984). Her artistic practice involves visual storytelling that addresses cultural norms and taboos, positioning her as a relevant figure in the broader discourse on feminism, decolonization, and graphic design. By depicting women's bodies and experiences in distinctly Moroccan settings, she invites discussions on bodily autonomy, gender norms, and societal constraints.

3.1 Fasiki's Work and Influence

Fasiki's engagement with art dates to her childhood. She later pursued mechanical engineering at the National School of Electricity and Mechanics in Casablanca, graduating in 2017, but encountered gender discrimination in the engineering field (Fasiki, 2019).

These experiences motivated her to shift toward an activist; oriented art practice, using illustration and graphic novels to highlight issues often considered taboo in Moroccan society.

In 2018, she introduced the **"Hshouma"** (Figure 37) project to address themes of bodily autonomy and sexuality as in Figure 13, culminating in the graphic novel *Hshouma* (2019). This work has been translated into multiple languages and critiques societal expectations around gender identities and sexual orientations (Fasiki, 2019; Miller, 2013).

By openly discussing topics like consent and sexual harassment, the project draws attention to the importance of comprehensive education on women's rights in the Moroccan context.

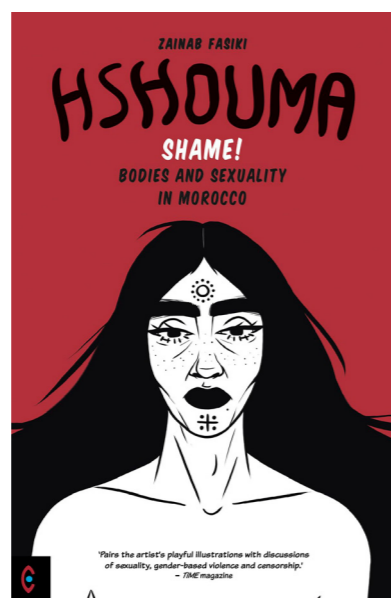


Figure 37. Book cover of *Hshouma: Shame, Bodies, and Sexuality in Morocco* by Zainab Fasiki. Source: Amazon.

Fasiki's illustrations frequently portray women in the nude (Figure 38) to normalize conversations around women's bodies. For example, *The Protector of Casablanca*, a green figure surveying the city, functions as a commentary on street harassment and patriarchal control in public spaces (Fasiki, 2019), (Figure 38).

Such symbolic interventions illustrate how visual art can confront deeply ingrained cultural taboos. Beyond her own publications, Fasiki founded the Women Power collective in 2018, which sponsors workshops for women artists. These workshops aim to foster self-expression, solidarity, and community building by encouraging emerging creators to explore feminist themes in their work.

Recently, the collective launched a Women Power Collective comic book (Figure 39) featuring the work of twenty Moroccan women artists who participated in its second residency. Focusing on street harassment in Morocco, this publication not only highlights the prevalence of gender-based harassment but also demonstrates how collective artistic initiatives can raise awareness and drive social discourse.

By making the book available during Fasiki's events, workshops, and exhibitions, Women Power actively reshapes the landscape of Moroccan feminist artistry moving beyond personal expression to provide infrastructure for collective advocacy.

Collaborations with organizations such as the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) further underscore Fasiki's commitment to social advocacy, with an emphasis on supporting marginalized groups, including refugees and survivors of violence (UNHCR, 2021).

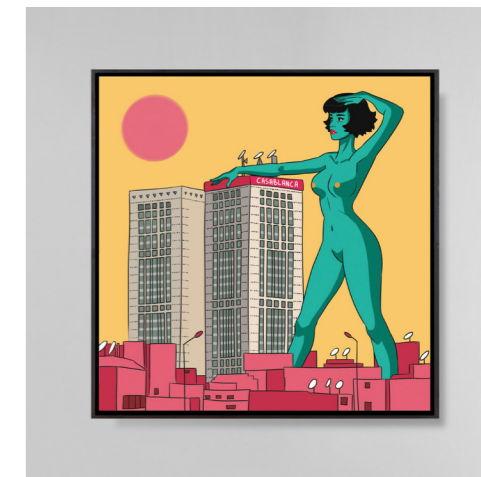


Figure 38. *The Protector of Casablanca* – illustration by Zainab Fasiki. Source: GVCC Art.



Figure 39. Women Power Collective workshop comic book by Zainab Fasiki. Photograph of the artist's Facebook page.

A distinctive element of Fasiki’s methodology is her incorporation of Moroccan cultural motifs—including traditional clothing, hammams (public baths), (Figure 40, 41), and calligraphy.

By placing women’s bodies and narratives in these familiar settings, her artwork challenges conservative interpretations of culture, reframing them as spaces for empowerment rather than subjugation.

This juxtaposition offers a multilayered commentary on how tradition can coexist with progressive feminist messages, resonating with those seeking to reconcile cultural identity with modern notions of women’s agency (Fasiki, 2019).



Figure 40. Illustration from Hshouma by Zainab Fasiki. Extracted from the book Hshouma, owned by the author.



Figure 41. Illustration from Hshouma by Zainab Fasiki. Image blurred by the author of the thesis. Extracted from the book Hshouma.

3.2 Integration with the Project

The incorporation of Zainab Fasiki’s work into this project demonstrates how graphic design can serve as a conduit for social commentary and potential societal impact. Fasiki’s emphasis on decolonizing design by drawing on Moroccan cultural motifs and minimizing reliance on Western aesthetic standards, illustrates one approach to creating a locally resonant visual language (Fasiki, 2019). Nonetheless, critical evaluations of Hshouma, including the claim that it does not sufficiently delve into certain cultural taboos, highlight the complexity of appealing to diverse audiences while maintaining cultural sensitivity (Hiba, 2022; Berrihi, 2020).

In this project, the visual elements similarly aim to reflect the lived experiences of Moroccan women while remaining contextualized within familiar societal settings. Traditional motifs, such as Moroccan calligraphy and depictions of everyday spaces help ground the narrative in local cultural references. An example from Hshouma that informs this project’s direction is an illustration featuring the Shwafa, or fortune teller (Figure 42). Fasiki’s portrayal of this figure employs intricate patterns and culturally significant symbols, underscoring the mystique and cultural relevance surrounding such roles. The text “Ha qalbi, ha khatmati” (“Here is my heart, here are my thoughts”) alludes to phrases used by Moroccan fortune tellers when interpreting Ronda (Figure 43), (a traditional deck of cards), reflecting how vernacular expressions and imagery can enhance authenticity and relatability in visual storytelling.

Fasiki’s focus on bodily autonomy and her willingness to confront social taboos has significantly influenced the thematic framework of this project. However, critiques of Hshouma, particularly the explicit portrayal of nudity; have prompted a more measured approach when addressing sensitive topics. While some critics argue that such portrayals overshadow other pressing issues, including sexual orientation and gender-based violence, others contend that the work “didn’t go deep enough” (Hiba, 2022)



Figure 42. Illustration from Hshouma by Zainab Fasiki. Image blurred by the author of the thesis. Extracted from the book Hshouma.



Figure 43. Ronda Moroccan playing cards. Source: ronda-mobile.web.app.

or that “no taboo is dealt with in depth” (Berrihi, 2020). Given that Morocco is a predominantly Muslim country, these critiques emphasize the importance of balancing cultural respect with progressive discourse. In response, this research engages with a wide spectrum of concerns ranging from societal pressures to interpersonal violence while acknowledging the cultural and religious frameworks in which these narratives emerge. By adopting an inclusive lens, the project aims to further meaningful discussions around women’s empowerment and social transformation, ensuring its work remains both impactful and respectful of the communities it serves.



When examining how similar feminist comic art impacts society, Egyptian artist Deena Mohamed’s webcomic “Qahera” is a noteworthy example (Figure 44-45). Launched in 2013, “Qahera” boldly features a hijabi superheroine who combats street harassment, Islamophobia, and social injustice in Cairo (Mohamed, 2013; Abdel-Latif, 2015).

The comic quickly garnered a robust online following, sparking discussions across social media platforms and receiving coverage in outlets like Egypt Independent and The Guardian. Readers praised Deena’s approach for validating women’s daily experiences of harassment and challenging conservative norms from a faith-informed perspective (El-Wardani, 2018).



Figure 44–45. Illustrations from Qahera by Deena Mohamed
Source: Artist’s official website.

In a broader international context, Marjane Satrapi’s “Persepolis” (2004), (Figure 46-47), provides another example of how autobiographical storytelling can question patriarchal and authoritarian structures (Satrapi, 2004; Naficy, 2007).

Satrapi’s work, which explores growing up during the Iranian Revolution, earned critical acclaim worldwide and was adapted into an award-winning animated film, igniting dialogues about women’s rights and personal freedoms beyond Iran’s borders (Festival de Cannes, 2007). While Satrapi’s black-and-white aesthetic differs from Fasiki’s bold, colorful style steeped in Moroccan iconography, both demonstrate how personal narratives can catalyze societal debate. These examples illustrate that feminist comics, whether in Morocco, Egypt, or Iran, do more than reflect social issues; they actively shape discourse by encouraging public engagement, enhancing awareness of women’s struggles, and offering alternative visions of cultural norms.

Consequently, Fasiki’s work aligns with a wider regional and international movement where art serves as both commentary and catalyst for social change.

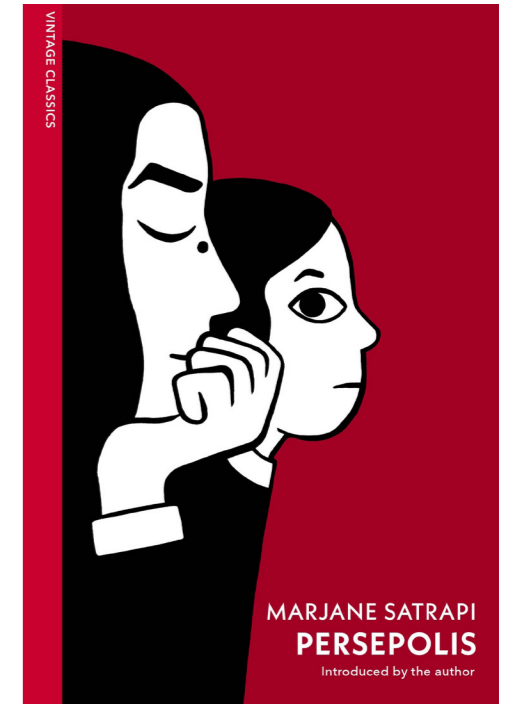
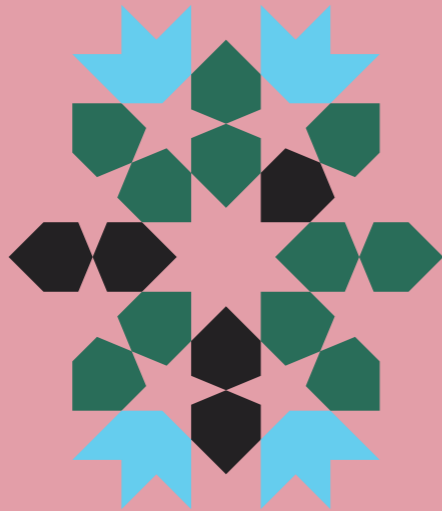


Figure 46. Book cover of Persepolis I & II by Marjane Satrapi
Source: Good Company Books.



Figure 47. Film poster reinterpretation.

Chapter 04



Research Methodology

- 4.1 Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches
- 4.2 Decolonization in Practice

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

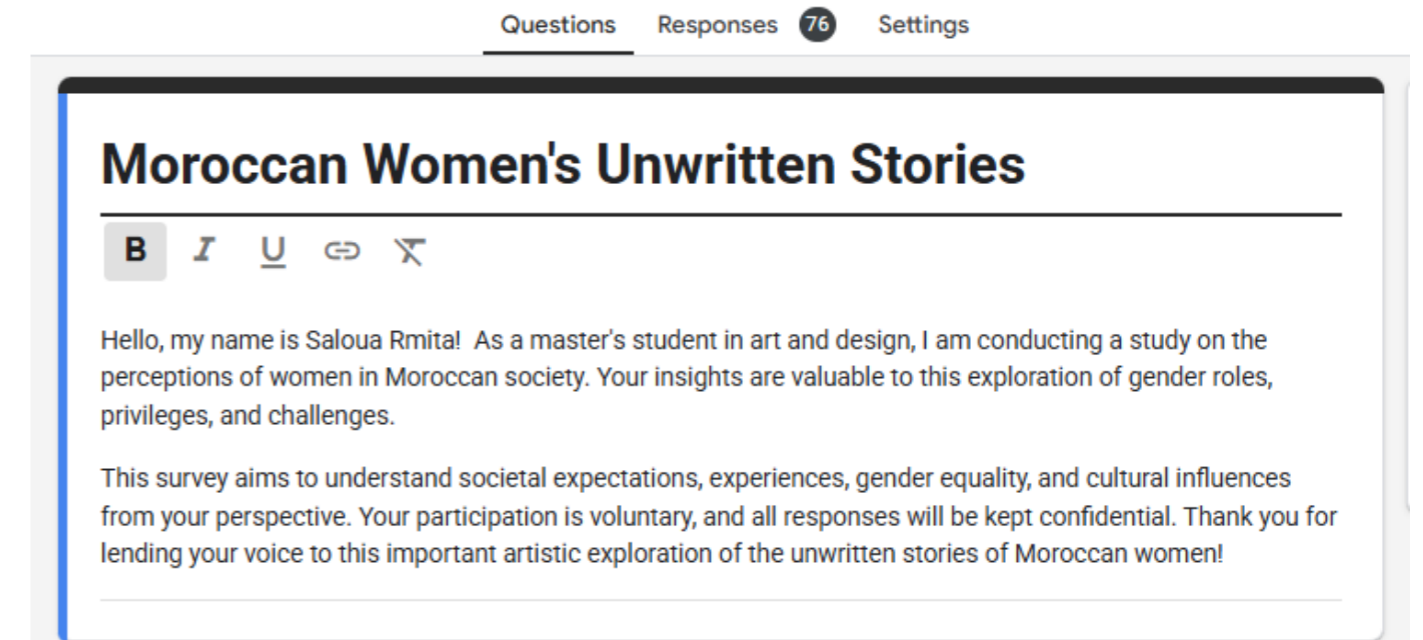
This project strategically places the methodology chapter after the theoretical framework and case study to ensure that the chosen methods are understood within the context of decolonial and feminist perspectives. By first examining the historical, social, and cultural context of Moroccan women's narratives, the methodological choices become clearer and more logically connected to the project's overarching goals. This placement reflects a decolonial research ethos, contextualizing methods within local realities and lived experiences before detailing data collection and analysis. It challenges traditional Eurocentric research paradigms by prioritizing the voices and experiences of the research participants, thus reinforcing the interconnectedness of theory and practice in decolonial feminist research.

4.1 Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

4.1.1 Introduction to Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine gender roles, cultural norms, and the influence of legal standards on gender equality in Morocco. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, it provides a multifaceted exploration of societal attitudes and individual experiences. Such an approach aligns with a decolonial perspective, which values diverse forms of knowledge (Smith, 2012) and seeks to ensure that Moroccan women's voices are central to the research. The qualitative strand comprises in-depth interviews with six Moroccan women, each representing varied socio-economic, educational, and regional backgrounds.

Meanwhile, the quantitative strand consists of 154 surveys (Figure 48–49) distributed in both Arabic and English to ensure a broad and inclusive representation of respondents, including Moroccans residing abroad and non-Moroccans with direct exposure to Moroccan society.



Figures 48–49. Summary of Google Forms responses regarding women's representation in Moroccan English and Arabic media

4.1.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative component centered on semi-structured interviews with six Moroccan women, each representing diverse socio-economic, educational, and regional backgrounds. To locate and engage participants, field visits were conducted across six Moroccan cities. In several cases, local associations served as key gateways—such as Dar Rahma in Chefchaouen (Figure 50) and Chourouk in Ben Guerir and Tata (Figure 51). In other instances, connections were established through more personal means: interviews in Tangier and Laayoune were hosted at the author’s residence, while the participant from Rabat was first met in a café, with the conversation later continued via video call.

However, in Chefchaouen, many women were initially hesitant to speak openly, reflecting local cultural norms around modesty; it was only after visiting around five different associations that Dar Rahma successfully encouraged one woman to share her story. Photographs were taken during these visits (Figure 50-51) to document the community settings where interviews took place, capturing the everyday environments of the women who chose to participate. This collaborative approach with local associations not only streamlined participant recruitment but also helped foster the trust and rapport needed for candid conversations. Once participants had agreed, interviews were conducted in comfortable, distraction-free settings. With their informed consent, audio recordings were made to capture the entirety of their narratives, and field notes detailed any nonverbal cues, such as gestures, facial expressions, or shifts in tone, that might not appear in transcripts. This methodology aimed to honor the nuanced experiences of participants, consistent with decolonial and feminist research principles (Smith, 2012).

The discussion topics ranged from economic empowerment and religious influences to cultural barriers hindering gender equality. Several participants detailed how financial independence conferred greater autonomy, enabling them to challenge traditional family and community norms. Others emphasized religious narratives, explaining that while faith can sometimes reinforce conventional gender roles, it can also serve as a source of moral support and community cohesion.



Figure 50. Moodboard of photographs gathered by the author during a visit to women’s associations in Chefchaouen
Photographs by the author



Figure 51. Moodboard of photographs gathered by the author during a visit to women’s associations in Benguerir
Photographs by the author

Common themes from these in-depth interviews include:

Financial Agency: Women with financial stability reported greater decision-making confidence, both at home and socially.

Resistance and Resilience: Many faced criticism or social ostracism for defying expectations, yet persisted for personal growth and family well-being.

Evolving Gender Norms: Generational shifts in attitudes toward education and employment suggest gradual changes in societal perceptions.

Interviews took place in a supportive setting to reduce discomfort and elicit honest responses, aligning with feminist and decolonial methodologies that prioritize participant well-being and context (Smith, 2012).

4.1.3 Quantitative Data Analysis

To capture broader societal attitudes, around 154 surveys were administered using two Google Forms: one in Arabic and another in English. This bilingual approach accommodated the linguistic diversity of Moroccan participants and ensured input from individuals both within and outside Morocco.

Analysis of the survey responses revealed the following findings:

Legal Protections: Approximately 75% of respondents acknowledged that current legal mechanisms in Morocco remain insufficient in safeguarding women against domestic violence.

Perceptions of Gender Equality & Superiority: As shown in Figure 48 (English) and Figure 49 (Arabic), perceptions of gender roles in Moroccan society reveal a notable disparity. When asked if they perceive men as superior to women, 50.9% of respondents across both language groups answered “yes.” Similarly, 45.2% of women surveyed reported feeling inferior to men in Moroccan society.

These findings underscore the enduring influence of societal norms on individual beliefs, highlighting a persistent gender perception gap.

Perception of Gender Bias in Moroccan Law & the Role of Education: As shown in Figure 52, 48% of respondents believe Moroccan law is free from gender bias. However, a notable disparity in responses between the English and Arabic surveys suggests that education level may significantly influence perceptions of legal fairness. Among respondents in the English survey, 63.2% held a postgraduate degree, compared to only 32.1% in the Arabic survey, (Figure 52-53).

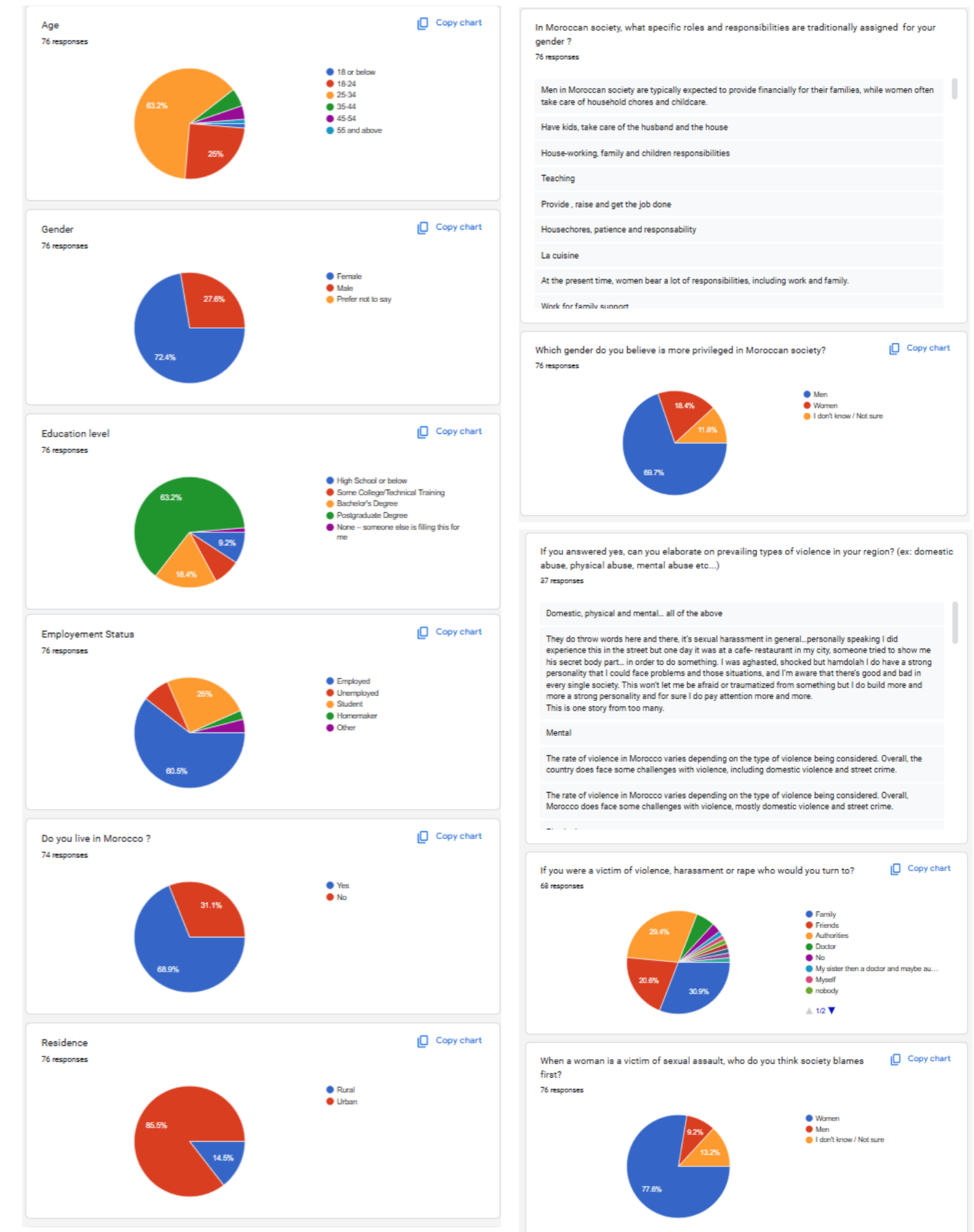


Figure 52. Survey data results on the perception of Moroccan women in Moroccan society

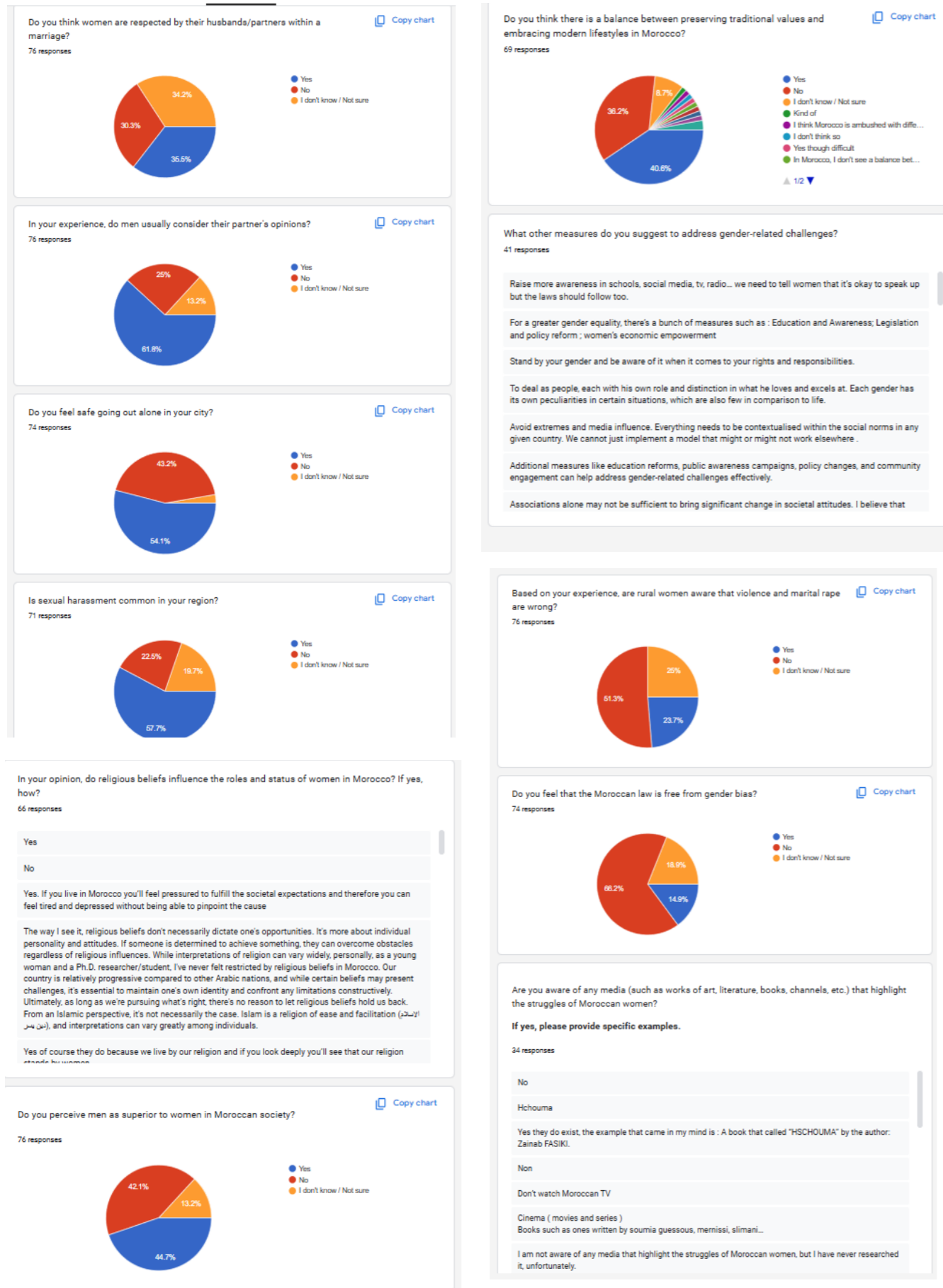


Figure 53. Continuation of survey data results on the perception of Moroccan women in Moroccan society

This discrepancy raises an important hypothesis:

the ability to critically assess and interpret legal frameworks may be correlated with higher education levels. A deeper understanding of the law; often facilitated by higher education; could lead to more nuanced perspectives on gender bias within legal structures. This suggests that legal literacy and access to higher education play a significant role in shaping perceptions of gender equality in Morocco's legal system. Further research could explore whether misconceptions or lack of familiarity with legal provisions contribute to differing views on gender bias in the law.

Sexual Harassment Concerns: A considerable proportion of participants indicated that preventative measures and social awareness surrounding sexual harassment remain inadequate, with many calling for more stringent enforcement of existing laws. However, a contradiction emerges when examining individual experiences; while 75% of respondents agreed that legal protections for women are insufficient, a significant number did not report firsthand encounters with sexual harassment.

This suggests potential underreporting or varying definitions of harassment across different demographic groups.

Cultural and Religious Influences: While most respondents agreed that cultural norms profoundly shape societal attitudes toward gender roles, nearly half suggested that these norms are evolving in tandem with increased global connectedness and education. By integrating qualitative and quantitative findings, this study embraces a mixed methods approach that values triangulation and corroboration.

This methodological balance is crucial for a decolonial and feminist project, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of Moroccan women's experiences. The approach prevents any single data source, whether numeric or narrative, from dominating the interpretation. This integration enhances the study's validity, mitigates potential biases, and captures the complexity of women's lived realities, aligning with the ethical and political considerations central to decolonial feminist research, (Figure 52-53).

4.2 Decolonization in Practice

4.2.1 Exploration of Legal and Social Norms

The study's exploration of decolonization in Morocco extends beyond political structures to encompass the re-evaluation of social and legal standards. A key focus was public opinion on practices deemed taboo, particularly the decriminalization of premarital sexual relationships.

The finding that 60% of survey respondents supported or somewhat supported decriminalization indicates a significant shift in attitudes towards greater gender equality and individual autonomy.

However, this support is tempered by persistent social stigma and religious considerations that continue to inhibit open public discourse (El Feki et al., 2017).

The research also highlighted consistent reports of sexual harassment and perceptions of inadequate protective measures. Many participants advocated for stronger legal frameworks and broader public awareness campaigns, reflecting the broader aims of decolonization in challenging historical taboos and inherited legal standards that limit women's rights and freedoms (Sadiqi, 2014).

4.2.2 Application of Decolonization in Social Contexts

Qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into the personal and communal struggles of confronting taboo topics. Participants expressed fears of social ostracism, potential repercussions for family honor, and internalized cultural norms that discourage open discussions on sexual autonomy or harassment. These narratives highlight the ongoing tension between traditional values and progressive ideals that profoundly influence the lived experiences of Moroccan women and men (Ennaji, 2016).

The study reveals that decolonizing social norms often requires gradual, community-level dialogues that account for the cultural importance of tradition while addressing the urgency for legal evolution. Incremental change, fostered by grassroots initiatives, educational outreach, and evolving public attitudes, emerges as a critical strategy in navigating the complexities of social transformation (Salime, 2011).

4.3 Integration of Findings

When considered in tandem, the qualitative interview data and the quantitative survey findings offer a panoramic view of gender equality in Morocco.

The interviews supply depth, illuminating personal experiences of resilience and systemic barriers, whereas the surveys provide breadth, revealing overarching trends in public attitudes toward legal protections, cultural norms, and potential policy reforms. This combination of detailed narratives and statistical evidence exemplifies the strengths of a mixed-methods approach, capturing the multifaceted nature of societal change.

Furthermore, framing this approach within a decolonial and feminist perspective underscores the importance of centering local voices and practices rather than importing external research frameworks thereby aligning with the broader objectives of this dissertation.

Chapter 05



Core Narratives of Moroccan Women

5.1 Stories of Moroccan Women

5.2 Role of Men in Advocacy

Chapter 5: Core Narratives of Moroccan Women

5.1 Stories of Moroccan Women

This chapter expands upon the mixed-methods findings presented in Chapter 4 by highlighting individual stories from six Moroccan women, each representing a distinct region of the country. Drawing on decolonial and feminist principles, these narratives serve as a contextual bridge between theoretical frameworks and practical design interventions explored in Chapter 6. By centering local women's voices and foregrounding their experiences, this chapter illuminates how cultural, socioeconomic, and geographical factors intersect to shape women's daily realities in Morocco.

The six regions (Figure 54) and their representative women are:

1. Tangier (Zaina): A northern coastal city known for its historic medina and cosmopolitan influences.

2. Chefchouen (Chama): A northeastern mountainous locale celebrated for its blue medina and tourism-driven economy.

3. Rabat (Aya): Morocco's capital, where government-led reforms often clash with deeply rooted family traditions.

4. El Haouz/Benguerir (Rkia): An inland area transitioning from agricultural traditions to increasing urbanization.

5. Tata (Souss Region; Yamna): A semi-desert region with strong Amazigh (Berber) cultural practices, constrained by limited infrastructure.

6. Laayoune/El Aiun (Sultana): A major city in the Sahara region, reflecting Sahrawi heritage and evolving social norms.

This approach, grounded in decolonial feminist perspectives, centers diverse local voices and challenges oversimplified portrayals of Moroccan women.

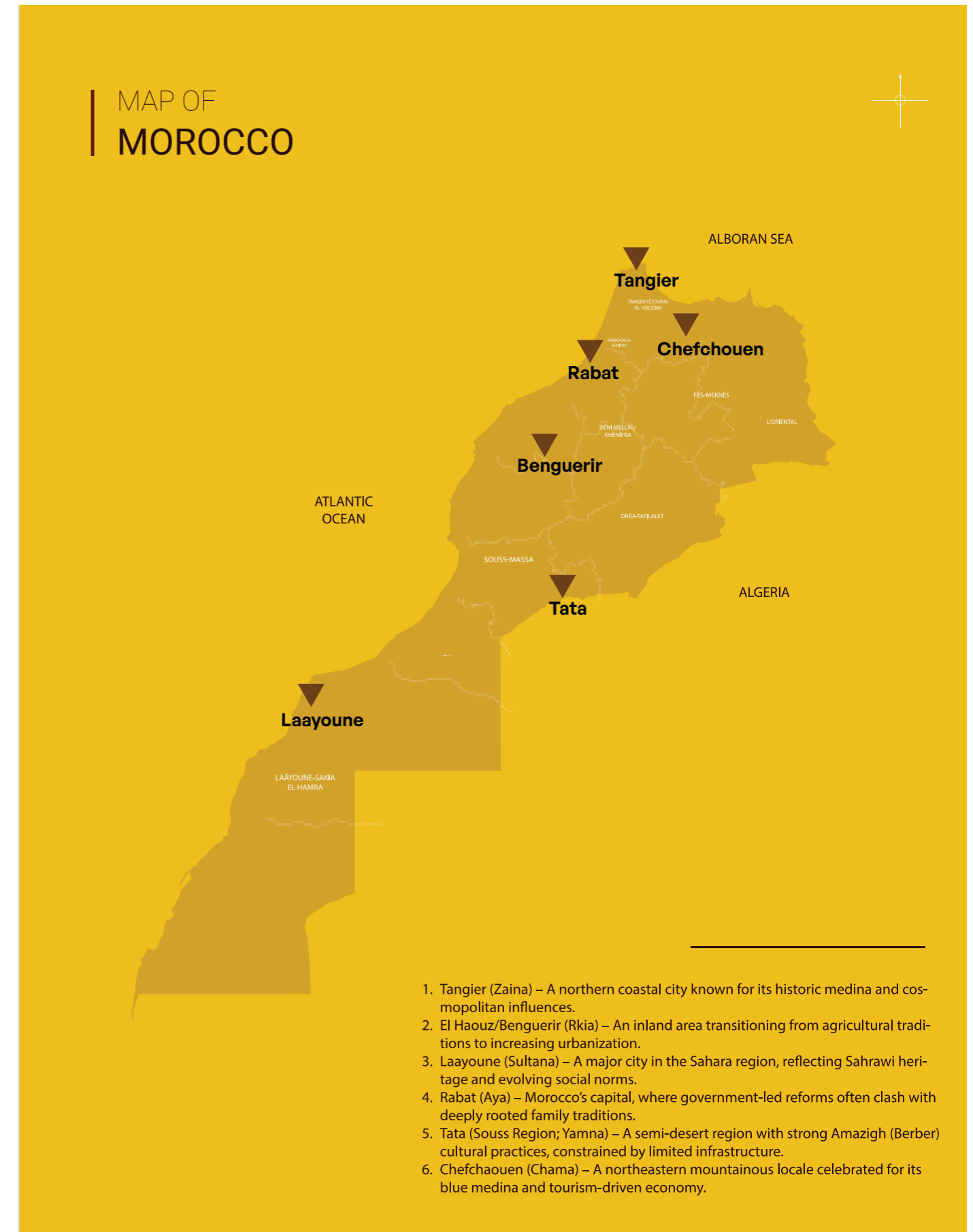


Figure 54. Map of Morocco highlighting the regions focused on in this dissertation
Map created by the author

Examining the distinct regions illustrated in Figures 55–60 reveals how tradition, modernity, and women’s agency intersect (Sadiqi, 2014; Salime, 2011). These narratives showcase the multifaceted realities of Moroccan women—ranging from urban professionals to rural craftswomen—and the strategies they use to reconcile traditional values with changing social norms (Ennaji, 2016).

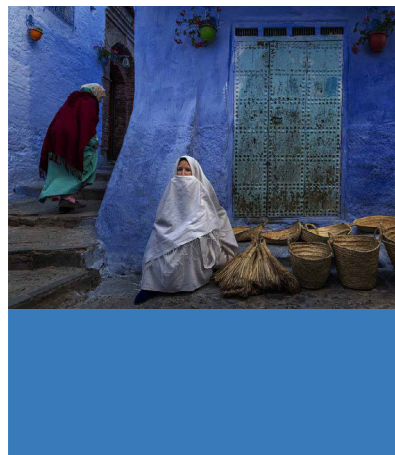


Figure 55. Woman wearing a traditional Moroccan haik in Chefchaouen
Photograph by Fadhel Almutaghawi, copyrighted



Figure 56. Actress Nora Skalli in the top-rated Moroccan series Dar Nssa, filmed in Tangier
Photograph of Welovebuzz, via Instagram



Figure 57. Woman in Rabat wearing a red kaftan
Photograph by Chaima Ouadi

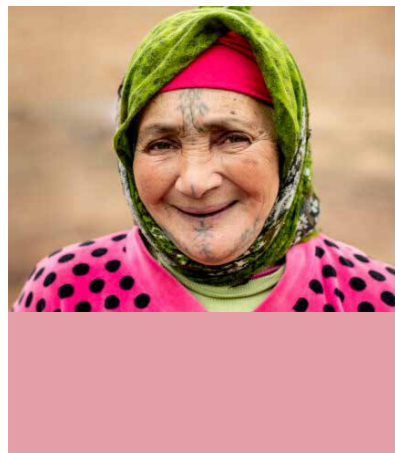


Figure 58. Women in the El Houaz region, Middle Atlas, Morocco



Figure 59. Traditional Moroccan scene featuring a woman in a yellow gandoura
Photograph by @khamisa5, Instagram

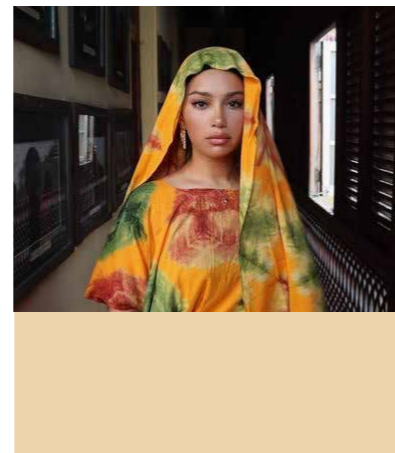


Figure 60. Woman wearing an intricate Sahrawi melhfa
Photograph by Amer Omar, sourced via Pinterest

5.1.2 Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative, participant-centered methodology explicitly grounded in decolonial principles. Rather than initiating interactions with structured questions, conversations began informally to build rapport, trust, and a comfortable environment for participants.

The women who participated were encouraged to narrate their personal experiences freely, allowing their stories to unfold naturally without immediate researcher intervention. Structured questions covering themes such as education, household and cultural expectations, economic status, and community participation were introduced only after the women had comfortably shared their personal narratives.

This approach ensured that the participants’ stories directed the interview structure, aligning closely with narrative inquiry and oral history methodologies. In regions such as Tata, translators proficient in Amazigh or local Arabic dialects facilitated clear and respectful communication. These translators were briefed to maintain linguistic accuracy, cultural nuance, and emotional authenticity, ensuring the integrity of each participant’s narrative.

This framework aligns with decolonial paradigms that center local perspectives and reject extractive methods. As Linda Smith (1999) notes, placing indigenous voices at the forefront “rewrit[es] and righ[t]s our position in history” (p. 28). More than a data-collection strategy, it ethically acknowledges women participants as co-creators of knowledge and collaborators in reshaping historical and cultural narratives.

5.1.3 Narrative Summaries

1. Zaina (Tangier)

Growing up near Tangier’s medina, Zaina was subjected to sexual harassment at a young age from a family member. Although Moroccan law ostensibly provides some avenues for recourse, 75% of survey respondents believe these mechanisms are insufficient, and Zaina never felt safe enough to report the incidents. “I thought no one would take me seriously because they always listen to men first,” she recalled. This fear reflects the 50.9% of respondents who believe men hold greater authority, indicating how deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs can dissuade survivors from seeking justice.

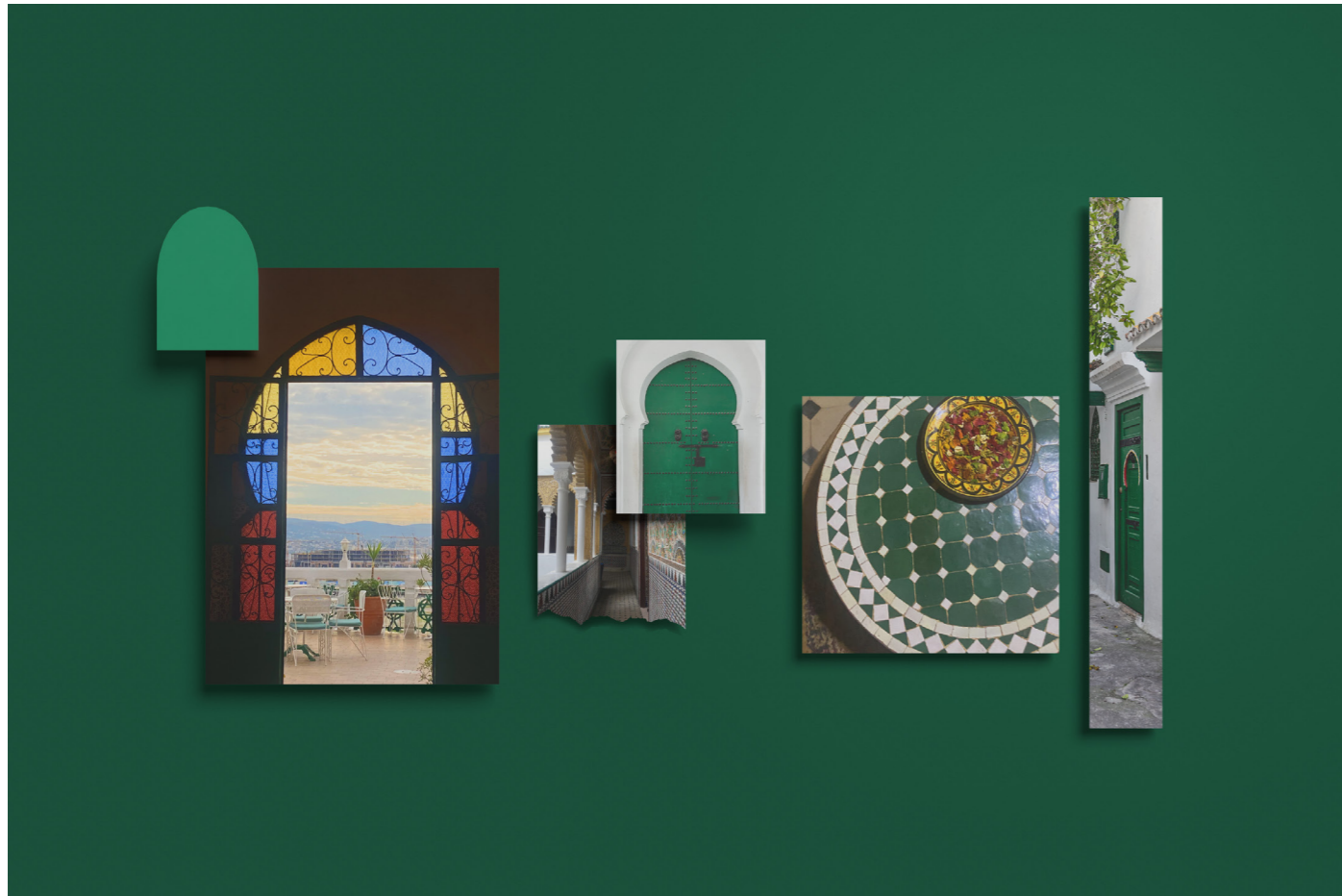


Figure 61. Collected photographs from the author’s research trip to Tangier
All photographs taken by the author

2. Chamaa (Chefchaouen)

Despite Chefchaouen’s reputation as a welcoming tourist destination, Chama struggles to divorce her abusive husband due to confusing and costly legal procedures. “I can’t afford what the courts demand, so I’m stuck,” she explained, highlighting the stark gap between Morocco’s progressive image and the actual barriers women face within the justice system. Her situation resonates strongly with survey findings, where 66% of respondents expressed the belief that Moroccan laws are not free from gender bias, and 51% indicated that rural women lack awareness that violence and marital rape are wrong.



Figure 62. Collected photographs from Chefchaouen
All photographs taken by the author

3. Aya (Rabat)

Aya aspired to pursue higher education and received strong encouragement from her family.

However, after marriage, her husband's perspective shifted: "He said he wanted an educated wife, but a housewife," she explained.

Aya's experience mirrors the survey data, in which approximately 30% of respondents felt that women are not respected by their husbands within marriage, and nearly 25% indicated that men generally do not consider their partners' opinions. These findings highlight the broader societal tension between educational aspirations and traditional marital expectations, emphasizing how deeply embedded cultural attitudes continue to shape women's experiences in Morocco.



Figure 63. Collected photographs from the author's research trip to Rabat
All photographs taken by the author

2. Rkia (El Haouz/Benguerir)

Rkia has cerebral palsy and lives in a rural, urban fringe community. After being raped, she discovered that the legal process did not account for her disability or her limited financial means. Her story exemplifies the 45.2% of female respondents who feel inferior in Moroccan society, as she encountered dismissal and confusion at every turn.

"They treated me like an afterthought, like I was exaggerating," she explained. Rkia's experience highlights the need for more robust legal protections and greater sensitivity to intersectional vulnerabilities.

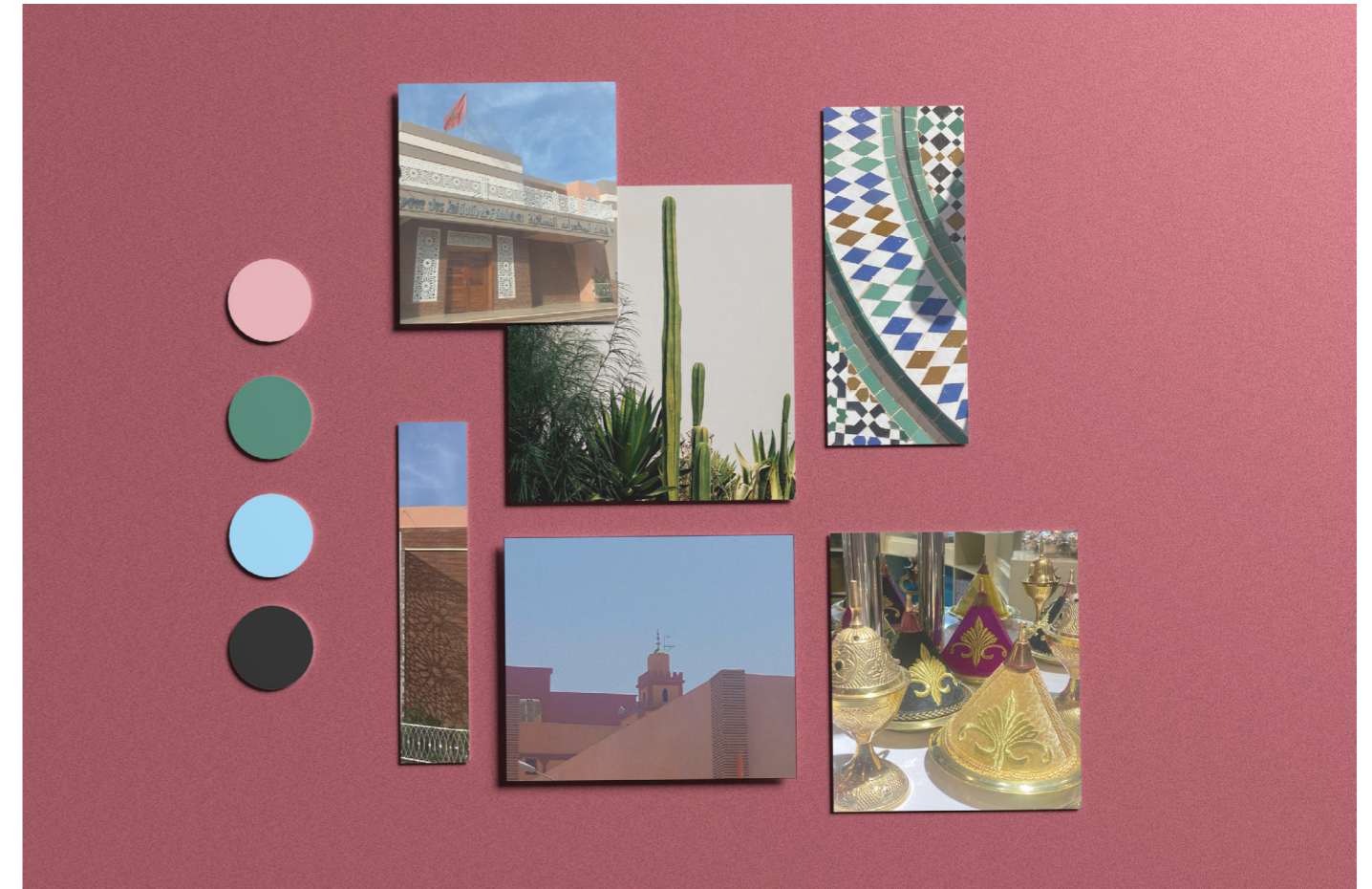


Figure 64. Collected photographs from Benguerir
All photographs taken by the author

5. Yamna (Tata, Souss Region)

In Tata, Yamna’s educational trajectory ended after primary school due to familial pressure toward early marriage, illustrating how geographic isolation and persistent cultural norms significantly constrain women’s educational access and autonomy.

“Traveling far for classes was out of the question for my family,” she explained, reflecting Tunstall’s (2013) critical observation that “dominant systems exclude local epistemologies.” Yamna’s subsequent marriage was characterized by domestic abuse and racial discrimination from her husband and his family, highlighting the intersectionality of gendered structural barriers and societal prejudices that further restrict women’s opportunities and affect their wellbeing.



Figure 65. Collected photographs representing Tata
Pictures taken in Marrakech and the Souss-Massa region (which includes Tata)
Photographs by the author

6. Sultana (Al Aiun / Laayoune)

Raised in Marrakech, Sultana faced abuse compounded by discrimination from her husband’s family.

“They always questioned my background, as if I didn’t truly belong,” she explained, underscoring how gender-based violence intersects with ethnic bias, intensifying women’s vulnerabilities. Her experience aligns with survey findings indicating that cultural and religious influences profoundly shape societal attitudes, reinforcing entrenched traditions that discourage women from voicing their struggles or seeking support and change.



Figure 66. Moodboard of scenes from Laayoune and Volubilis
Photographs by Envato, copyrighted

5.1.4 Connecting Narratives to Feminist and Decolonial Perspectives

The six narratives presented in this chapter illuminate the pressing realities of gender equality in Morocco, emphasizing the necessity of situating local experiences at the forefront of this discourse. Zaina's fear of reporting her abuse and Chama's struggles with bureaucratic hurdles in seeking a divorce exemplify the dissonance between established policy frameworks and their practical enforcement. These stories resonate with the decolonial objective of "shifting the locus of enunciation" (Tunstall, 2013, p. 236), highlighting the urgent need for intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1991) to address the multifaceted challenges faced by Moroccan women. As these accounts reveal, despite legislative advancements, significant gaps persist between legal protections and lived realities. The USAID/Morocco Gender Analysis underscores this point, noting that "discriminatory provisions in the Family and Penal codes and in social norms continue to perpetuate gender inequality" (USAID, 2018, p. 4). The experiences of Zaina and Chama serve as poignant reminders of how these systemic barriers manifest in daily life.

Moreover, the narratives illustrate the importance of an intersectional lens in understanding the complexities of gender inequality in Morocco. Sadiqi (2014) emphasizes that factors such as geographic location, economic status, and cultural background intricately intersect with gender, shaping women's experiences in profound ways. Each woman's story reflects this intersectionality, revealing how traditional norms and modern aspirations coexist and often clash. The need for context-specific approaches to promoting gender equality is further underscored by the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) 2023 profile for Morocco, which highlights ongoing challenges related to discrimination within families and access to resources (OECD, 2023). The stories shared by these women not only illustrate these broader trends but also bring them to life through personal experiences that resonate deeply.

By weaving these individual narratives into a broader feminist and decolonial framework, we gain a richer understanding of gender equality in Morocco. This approach not only honors the voices of local women but also illuminates pathways for meaningful change that are rooted in their lived realities.

5.2 Role of Men in Advocacy

5.2.1 Male Advocacy in Community Initiatives

Progress in gender relations often requires men who leverage their influence to support rather than overshadow women's aims. Cornwall and Edwards (2010) posit that "Men who are actively engaged in women's empowerment can challenge and transform patriarchal norms from within" (p. 5). Throughout the fieldwork for this dissertation, many of the associations encountered were founded or spearheaded by men who recognized the importance of women's participation.

In some instances, women who were initially hesitant to share sensitive details about their experiences found it easier to open up when encouraged by these male advocates, who provided a sense of trust and support. Moreover, certain men in positions of authority, such as a commissioner who assisted Zaina, offered tangible support by validating her account of sexual harassment, contrasting sharply with the broader patriarchal culture that often silences survivors.

During data collection for this research, men also played an instrumental role in providing logistical help, offering contacts, bridging language gaps in remote regions, and facilitating interviews. This support occasionally proved vital when some women were initially unwilling to participate, either due to fear or cultural norms discouraging open discussion of personal traumas. By creating a comfortable and reassuring environment, these male advocates enabled women to voice their narratives more freely.

Taken together, these examples highlight how male allies can become catalysts for women's empowerment, especially in contexts where patriarchal structures persist. By providing encouragement, resources, or even just a sense of safety, men can help expand the spaces in which women feel comfortable sharing their stories. This reality supports hooks's (2000) claim that "patriarchy has no gender," emphasizing the need for collaborative, rather than oppositional, efforts in dismantling oppressive norms.

5.2.2 Intersections with Feminist and Decolonial Goals

The collaborative efforts of men and women in Morocco contribute to decolonizing gender roles by favoring “co-created knowledge” (Tunstall, 2013, p. 239) over externally imposed solutions. This approach aligns with feminist theories advocating for intersectional partnerships to dismantle hierarchical systems. As Cornwall and Edwards (2010) note, “Collaborations that respect the diverse experiences of women and rely on dialogue, not dominance, create the conditions for real social transformation” (p. 12). The narratives from various regions in Morocco illuminate how societal conventions, limited educational opportunities, economic pressures, and inconsistent legal enforcement restrict women’s autonomy.

Recurring challenges include sexual harassment, family opposition to formal education, and lack of accessible legal recourse for abuse and divorce. These accounts build upon the survey and interview data presented earlier, highlighting entrenched biases and the urgent need for comprehensive legal and cultural interventions.

Recent initiatives in Morocco demonstrate progress towards gender equality. The revised Code of Personal Status (CSP) now upholds the principle of equality between men and women and confirms joint responsibility for the family (Sadiqi, 2014). Additionally, women’s representation in decision-making positions has improved, with women holding 10.8 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Representatives in 2002 (Ennaji, 2016). However, challenges persist. The “Mudawana” or family code, while reformed, still allows for gender inequality and sexism to persist (Salime, 2011). Social barriers strongly endorse traditional roles for women as housewives and guardians of children, despite constitutional guarantees of equal rights (El Feki et al., 2017).

Male allies emerge as potential catalysts for expanding women’s rights, lending public credibility to demands for change. This aligns with the need for a “National Strategy for Equity and Equality” that addresses multiple areas of gender disparity, including equal access to education, health services, and decision-making positions (USAID, 2018).

Building on these insights, the subsequent chapter explores how visual methodologies and design strategies can amplify Moroccan women’s voices. By weaving the cultural complexities and lived realities described here into practical design solutions, the research aims to move beyond merely documenting social obstacles.

Instead, it seeks to co-create interventions that spark dialogue, challenge entrenched norms, and provide a more inclusive platform for expressing women’s narratives.

This integrated approach not only underscores the significance of culturally grounded design but also responds to the call for locally driven solutions to advance gender equality in Morocco.

Chapter 06



Practical Work: Design Choices and Applications

- 6.1 Establishing the Design Narrative
- 6.2 How Minimalism Reflects the Stories

Chapter 6: Practical Work – Design Choices and Applications

Building on the theoretical foundations (Chapters 2 and 3) and the mixed-methods insights (Chapters 4 and 5), this chapter focuses on the practical design component of the project. The core objective is to visually portray the stories of six Moroccan women, each rooted in a distinct region. By employing culturally informed minimalism and region-specific motifs, this practical work aims to decolonize graphic design methodologies while foregrounding local voices and aesthetics.

Throughout the process, qualitative feedback and iterative refinement guided the design choices, ensuring that each visual element resonates with the women's lived experiences rather than merely reflecting external concepts of Moroccan identity.

In the initial phase, the study collected narratives of women from six different Moroccan regions, noting how their clothing and styles vary in ways that reflect each region's local atmosphere and cultural context. This approach aligns with Sadiqi's (2014) emphasis on the importance of local context in understanding Moroccan women's experiences. Building on this foundation, the chapter discusses the design strategy underpinning each woman's story, detailing the chosen color palettes, illustration styles, and geometric motifs.

The accompanying figures illustrate how these women's stories are grouped according to their respective regions, highlighting the cultural and geographical variety within Morocco. By adopting a decolonizing design approach, as advocated by Tunstall (2013), the project integrates minimalism as a means of amplifying these women's voices without overshadowing their individual narratives, thereby extending the decolonial and feminist frameworks established earlier.

Book Design Process and Creative Choices

In the initial phase of designing the book, the primary concept revolved around a cover prominently featuring shades of green.

This choice drew inspiration directly from Moroccan architecture, particularly from cities like Tangier, and was simultaneously influenced by the green found on the Moroccan national flag.

Central to this design was the title of the book, "Zif Hayati" (Figure 67) ("the veil of my life"), symbolized by the traditional Moroccan veil, Zif Hayati. This veil, traditionally green, carries significant cultural meaning, deeply connected to Moroccan women and broadly recognized across Moroccan society. Historically, it is predominantly used by women following their visits to hammams (Moroccan baths), reinforcing its profound cultural resonance.

The choice of Zif Hayati as a symbol is intentional, representing a universally relatable object within Moroccan culture, closely linked to women's daily experiences.

The Zif Hayati metaphorically encapsulates the lived realities of Moroccan women, symbolizing something intimate yet universally recognizable within their collective narratives (Figure 68-69).

It is positioned conceptually as a silent witness, present through the varied phases and challenges of Moroccan women's lives.



Figure 67. Zif Hayati – traditional Moroccan hammam veil
Product photograph of Herboriste en Ligne



Figure 68. Back view of a girl wearing the Moroccan veil in an alternative style
Photograph taken by the author

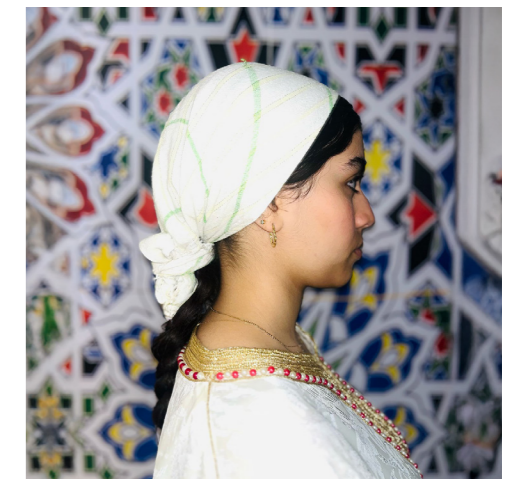


Figure 69. Side profile of a girl wearing the Moroccan veil in an alternative style
Photograph taken by the author



Figure 74. Book cover mockup — Arabic version
Design by the author



Figure 75. Displays the spine of the book
Design by the author



Figures 76–77. Book cover mockups — English versions
Design by the author



6.1 Establishing the Design Narrative

The practical component (the book) was carefully developed through a rigorous design process, beginning with the deliberate choice of the A5 format. An A5 size was selected because this format complements visually driven narratives, providing an intimate, accessible reading experience suitable for illustration-rich books. The design underwent multiple iterations, particularly in typography, to optimize readability and aesthetic harmony. Initial test prints involved experimenting with various font sizes (Figure 78), ultimately settling on 13 pt body text with 15 pt leading, as this combination provided optimal readability and sufficient white space for a balanced visual presentation. Headlines were set at 100 pt, specifically for covers and chapter separators, to clearly establish visual hierarchy and create distinct section markers. The illustrations also underwent extensive evaluation and refinement, incorporating feedback from individuals of diverse backgrounds to ensure the visual language was culturally respectful, conceptually aligned, and authentically representative of Moroccan women's stories (Figure 79). Each chapter will begin with visually clean, minimal separators clearly representing the distinct regions, a design approach that will be elaborated upon further in subsequent chapters.

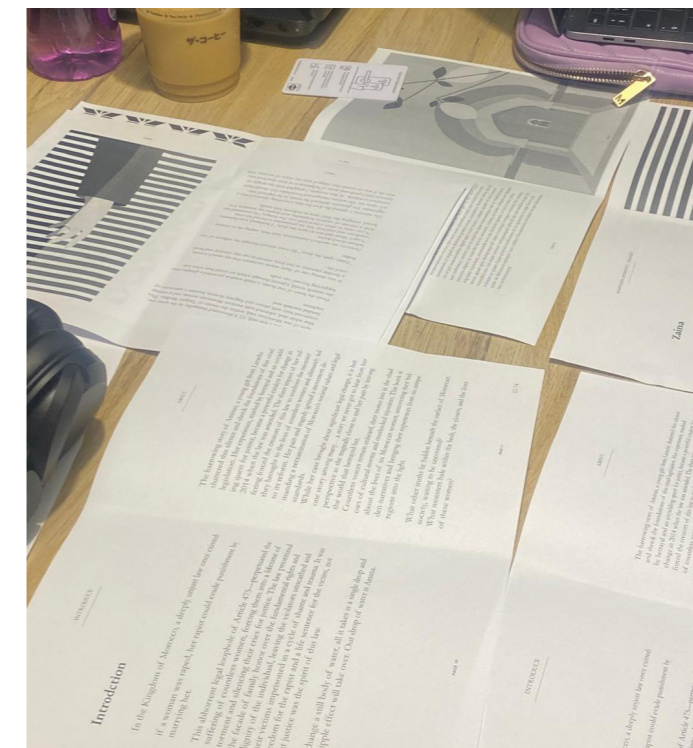


Figure 78. Field documentation of the first print draft trial
Photograph of the early prototype printing process

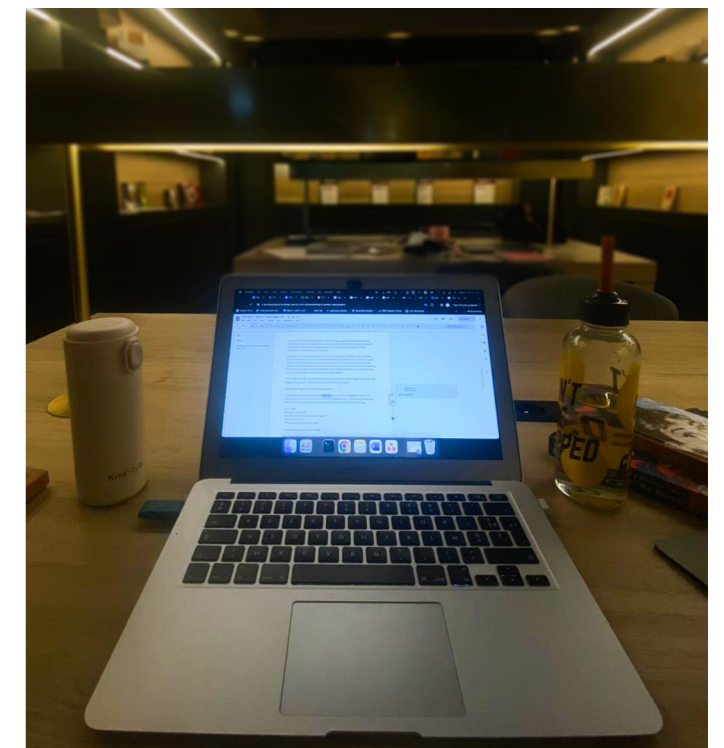


Figure 79. Behind-the-scenes scene of the author's creative process. Documenting the writing phase and illustration planning

An essential aspect of this design process involved consulting individuals from diverse cultural, academic, and artistic backgrounds to evaluate the evolving visual style.

In initial test prints (Figure 78), the illustration style appeared more crowded and somewhat dull, prompting concerns about potentially overshadowing the women's personal narratives. As feedback indicated a preference for cleaner, more focused imagery, the designs were simplified and refined to reflect a more minimalist aesthetic. This transition ensured that each visual element served the core objective of amplifying the women's voices, while remaining aligned with Moroccan cultural values and aesthetic sensibilities.

6.1.1 Rationale for Region; Based Sections

The rationale for organizing the book into six region-based sections effectively captures the diverse cultural identities within Morocco. This approach aligns with the country's rich cultural tapestry, which blends Arab, Berber, Andalusian, Mediterranean, and African influences (Sadiqi, 2014).

By focusing on distinct regions, the book reflects Morocco's geographical and cultural diversity, where traveling from one region to another can feel like moving between different countries.

Qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into the personal and communal struggles of confronting taboo topics. Participants expressed fears of social ostracism, potential repercussions for family honor, and internalized cultural norms that discourage open discussions on sexual autonomy or harassment.

These narratives underscore the ongoing tension between traditional values and progressive ideals that profoundly influence the lived experiences of Moroccan women and men (Ennaji, 2016).

The study reveals that decolonizing social norms often requires gradual, community-level dialogues that account for the cultural importance of tradition while addressing the urgency for legal evolution. Incremental change, fostered by grassroots initiatives, educational outreach, and evolving public attitudes, emerges as a critical strategy in navigating the complexities of social transformation (Salime, 2011).



Figure 80. Mockup of the Tangier section separator – Zaina

The color palettes and geometric shapes selected for each region thoughtfully embody local aesthetics and cultural identities:

Zaina (Tangier):

The choice of a green and white palette encapsulates Tangier's vibrant cosmopolitan atmosphere and historical significance as a crossroads of diverse cultures.

This visual representation directly aligns with the city's Andalusian heritage, prominently featured in its architectural styles, traditional motifs, and cultural practices (Salime, 2011). The geometric forms further evoke Tangier's dynamic legacy, bridging its historical narratives with contemporary visual expression.



Figure 81. Mockup of the Chefchaouen section separator

Chama (Chefchouen):

The selected blue and yellow palette vividly represents Chefchaouen's iconic medina, famously known as Morocco's "Blue Pearl." The dominant blue symbolizes spirituality, tranquility, and cultural memory, tracing back to the Jewish refugee community that settled there during the 1930s (Ennaji, 2016). The complementary yellow is inspired by the region's abundant orange groves, evoking the warmth, vitality, and natural richness of the local landscape. Together, these colors visually articulate both Chefchaouen's distinctive aesthetic and its unique historical and agricultural heritage.



Figure 82. Mockup of the Rabat section separator

Aya (Rabat):

The beige and red palette symbolizes Rabat's unique status as Morocco's capital, thoughtfully blending traditional heritage with contemporary innovation. The choice of beige represents the city's historical architecture, characterized by earthy tones and traditional materials, while red denotes vitality, strength, and modernizing aspirations. This palette effectively encapsulates Rabat's ongoing balance between preserving cultural authenticity and embracing progressive transformation (El Feki et al., 2017).



Figure 83. Mockup of the Benguerir section separator

Rkia (Benguerir):

The diverse palette, featuring shades of pink, green, and blue, visually articulates Ben Guerir's transitional identity between rural tradition and urban expansion. Pink symbolizes the warmth and vibrancy of local community life, while green and blue reflect the agricultural heritage and evolving urban infrastructure. Collectively, these colors encapsulate Morocco's broader context of rapid urbanization and the accompanying developmental complexities (USAID, 2018).



Figure 84. Mockup of the Tata section separator

Yamna (Tata):

The selected brown and yellow palette highlights Tata's rich Amazigh heritage and its distinctive semi-desert landscape. Brown evokes the earth and traditional building materials characteristic of Berber architecture, while yellow symbolizes the region's arid environment and sunlit terrain.

Together, these colors underscore the strong presence of Berber cultural traditions in Tata, emphasizing the broader importance of preserving indigenous identities and practices within Morocco's diverse cultural fabric (Sadiqi, 2014).



Figure 85. Mockup of the El Aiun section separator

Sultana (El Aiun):

The brown and orange palette effectively evokes the distinct hues of the Saharan desert, symbolizing Laayoune's strategic position as a gateway to the Sahara region.

The use of brown represents the expansive, grounding quality of the desert environment, while orange signifies warmth, resilience, and cultural vitality. This thoughtful integration of colors underscores Laayoune's significant role in connecting diverse cultural identities and bridging geographical boundaries within Morocco (Salime, 2011).

The visual strategy employed not only distinctly frames each woman's narrative but also functions pedagogically to familiarize readers with Morocco's intricate regional diversity. It resonates with the nation's multifaceted linguistic and cultural composition, characterized by both horizontal diversity and vertical stratification (Ennaji, 2016).

By thoughtfully integrating region-specific motifs, palettes, and geometric forms, the book's design respectfully highlights and honors localized aesthetics, from Chefchaouen's emblematic blue streets to the earthy, desert-inspired hues associated with Laayoune.

Through this strategic visual contextualization, each woman's story is effectively grounded in the unique cultural fabric of her respective region. This approach enriches the readers' understanding by visually guiding them through Morocco's varied landscapes and cultural contexts, clearly illustrating how the lived experiences of women are deeply intertwined with their local environments.

6.1.2 Linking Design to Decolonizing Approaches

By centering local colors, patterns, and regional identities, the project embodies principles of decolonizing design. This aligns with Tunstall's (2013) call to action: "Decolonizing design calls us to reject universalist aesthetics in favor of culturally contextual practices" (p. 235).

The decision to base each chapter's visual identity on region-specific cultural heritage deliberately challenges prevailing globalized or Western aesthetic frameworks, which have historically marginalized or overshadowed indigenous aesthetics and epistemologies.

Through this method, the design becomes an active form of resistance, acknowledging and amplifying marginalized narratives and empowering local visual traditions. It disrupts the dominance of Western design paradigms by foregrounding the significance of culturally authentic representation, thereby contributing to a broader discourse on visual sovereignty. Ultimately, this decolonial approach in design serves to affirm and validate local identities and knowledge systems, positioning visual storytelling not merely as aesthetic practice but as a meaningful engagement with cultural dignity and historical accuracy.

6.1.3 Minimalist Illustration as Visual Strategy

The use of minimalism as a visual strategy in this project serves multiple purposes aligned with decolonizing design principles. By employing clean lines, limited color palettes, and simplified geometric patterns, the illustrations frame each woman's story without overwhelming it. This approach deliberately contrasts with the richly detailed, ornamental designs often associated with Orientalist depictions of Morocco, which have historically exoticized and romanticized local aesthetics (Said, 1978). Minimalism in this context re-centers the content - the woman's journey - by distilling visual elements down to their essential forms. This aligns with Smith's (1999) assertion that a decolonizing methodology "places the subject's experiences as central" (p. 39). The minimalist approach in illustration accomplishes this by emphasizing each woman's narrative above all else, shifting focus away from potentially stereotypical or exoticized representations of Moroccan culture.

This visual strategy also resonates with the broader movement to decolonize design, which challenges the dominance of Western aesthetics and perspectives in the field (Tunstall, 2013). By simplifying the visual language, the project creates space for the women's voices and experiences to take center stage, rather than being overshadowed by elaborate or potentially stereotypical design elements. Furthermore, the use of minimalism allows for a more nuanced representation of each region's cultural identity. Instead of relying on ornate patterns that might reinforce Orientalist stereotypes, the simplified geometric shapes and limited color palettes can more subtly evoke the essence of each locale without resorting to clichéd imagery (Sadiqi, 2014). This approach aligns with the goal of decolonizing design by challenging the "unstable images of Moroccan indigenous art, architecture and design" that are often exported for commercial promotion (Irbouh, 2005, p. 145). Instead, it seeks to create authentic visual representations that emerge from the intersection of local cultural capital and contemporary artistic expression, while keeping the focus firmly on the women's narratives.

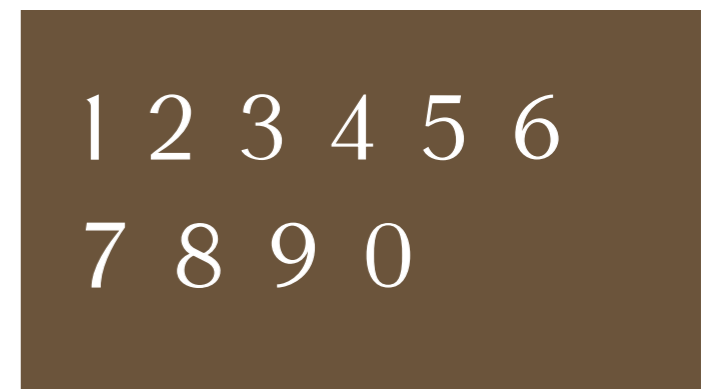
6.1.4 Typography: Balancing Familiarity and Seriousness

The typographic choices in this project demonstrate a nuanced approach to balancing readability, cultural sensitivity, and visual appeal in a multilingual publication.

This strategy aligns with contemporary trends in Arabic type design that seek to harmonize traditional calligraphic elements with modern typographic needs, while also addressing the challenges of creating cohesive multilingual layouts (Boutros, M. (2005)).

Distrampler (Serif for Headlines)

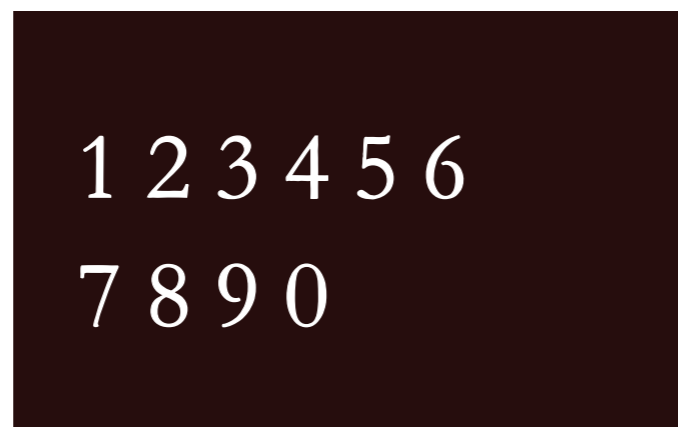
Distrampler, an elegant serif typeface, is strategically employed for main headings and sub-headings, lending a sophisticated visual rhythm to each section's introduction. As demonstrated the distinctive serif details enhance readability and emphasize the thematic clarity of the headlines. This typographic choice not only establishes a cohesive visual hierarchy but also provides readers with clear structural markers, facilitating seamless navigation through the book's narrative and thematic content.



Garamond (Serif Typeface for Body Text)

Garamond, a classic serif typeface renowned for its readability and subtle elegance, is utilized for the book's main body copy and extended texts in languages other than Arabic.

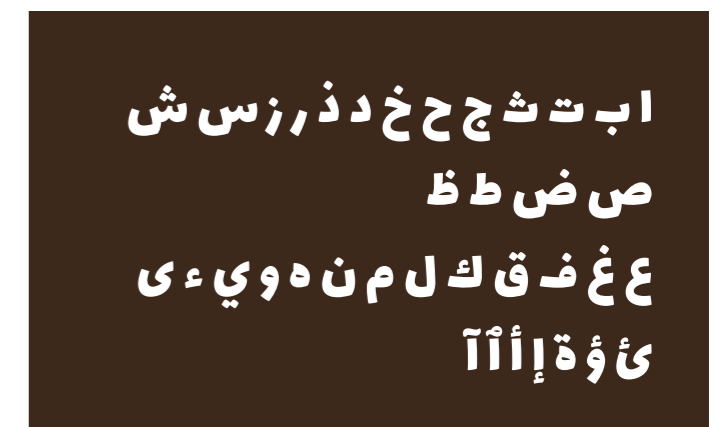
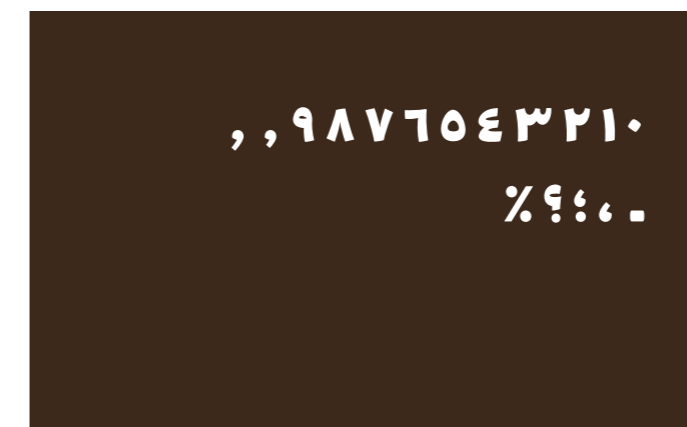
Frequently associated with narrative and literary contexts, Garamond enhances the storytelling dimension, inviting readers to engage deeply with each woman's personal journey. Its understated sophistication complements the minimalist aesthetic, ensuring clarity and comfort for sustained reading without visually overwhelming the narrative content.



FilmFarsi (Arabic Typeface)

FilmFarsi, a bold and playful Arabic typeface, is strategically employed in passages containing expressive or emotionally charged language. Its distinctive visual character serves to modulate the intensity of powerful words or phrases, maintaining a sensitive balance between emotional gravity and visual approachability.

As illustrated, this typographic choice effectively underscores the cultural nuance and linguistic richness inherent in each woman's narrative, deepening readers' engagement without diminishing the seriousness of their experiences.



The combination of these typefaces reflects an understanding of the challenges in Arabic type design, particularly in creating harmonious multilingual layouts. As noted by Chahine (2012), there's a need to balance classical and modern lettering in contemporary Arabic typography. The described approach achieves this balance by using a modern Arabic typeface (FilmFarsi) alongside more traditional Latin typefaces. This typographic strategy also aligns with the project's goal of decolonizing design by giving equal importance to Arabic and non-Arabic text, and by choosing an Arabic typeface that can express the emotional nuances of the women's stories.

It demonstrates an awareness of the cultural and linguistic complexities involved in representing Arabic script alongside Latin script, a challenge often discussed in the field of Arabic typography (Zoghbi, 2015).

By pairing Distrampler for headlines, Garamond for non-Arabic body text, and FilmFarsi for Arabic sections, the overall layout sustains a minimalist aesthetic that respects local nuances.

This triple-font strategy ensures clarity, navigability, and a measure of visual warmth, ultimately amplifying, rather than overshadowing, each woman's narrative, which aligns with the principles of culturally sensitive design as outlined by Tunstall (2013).

6.2 How Minimalism Reflects the Stories

6.2.1 Enriching Clarity and Respect

Minimalist design emphasizes clarity and readability, allowing readers to focus on each woman's narrative without unnecessary visual distractions. The following illustrations demonstrate how locally grounded minimalism supports the chapter's decolonizing goals by highlighting personal stories, regional nuances, and cultural artifacts, rather than indulging in ornamental or exoticized representations.

Tangier (Zaina) – Coastal Heritage Through a Minimalist Lens

In Figure 86 (Tangier: Zaina), the illustration captures an intimate interior scene featuring a window from within Zaina's house, rendered thoughtfully in shades of yellow and Tangier's iconic green. This specific color combination evokes the vibrant coastal environment of Tangier and underscores its historical connection to Andalusian aesthetics. The window itself is meticulously styled to echo the traditional architectural features commonly found within Tangier's old medina, incorporating intricate patterns and structural details that embody the city's cultural richness.

Additionally, geometric motifs derived from Tangier's architectural vocabulary subtly frame the composition, maintaining a minimalist design ethos. By carefully simplifying the scene into fundamental lines, shapes, and colors, the illustration highlights the city's distinctive identity while respectfully foregrounding Zaina's personal narrative and emotional connection to her lived environment.



Figure 86. Mockup of illustration capturing an intimate interior scene — a window from within Zaina's world

Dark Green Arabic Text – Sensitive Content Emphasis

A second spread (Figure 87) employs a deep green background to prominently feature an emotionally charged Arabic quotation: “You’re an immoral woman. You’re going to hell. A troublemaker. You’re the cause of it all. God won’t forgive you.” Set in a contemporary yet softly bold Arabic typeface, FilmFarsi, the typography conveys both the intensity and sensitivity inherent in such stark societal judgments often directed at women.

The minimalistic composition further emphasizes the severity of these accusations, creating visual tension through deliberate simplicity.

Additionally, the restrained color palette ensures that the viewer’s attention remains fixed firmly on the textual content, amplifying its emotional resonance without visual distraction.

This typographic selection and layout reflect a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in Arabic type design, especially concerning multilingual readability and aesthetic cohesion.

As Chahine (2012) highlights, contemporary Arabic typography must navigate the delicate balance between classical elegance and modern expressive possibilities.

By strategically pairing FilmFarsi, a modern Arabic font, with traditional Latin typefaces such as Garamond, the design successfully bridges historical and contemporary aesthetic considerations. Consequently, the composition harmoniously integrates visual authenticity with effective communication, thoughtfully addressing both cultural sensitivity and modern design standards.



Figure 87. Deep green background featuring an emotionally charged Arabic quotation

Chefchaouen (Chama) – Doorway to Dar Rahma

Figure 88 (Chefchaouen: Chama) depicts an intricately rounded doorway inspired by local door styles found throughout Chefchaouen and the broader Rif region spaces often regarded as symbolic portals to the city's inner identity.

Known for its striking palette of blues, Chefchaouen blends Andalusian influences with North African traditions; some interpretations attribute these hues to spiritual or protective symbolism, while others cite pragmatic reasons, such as insect deterrence (Ennaji, 2016).

In this illustration, the doorway specifically represents Dar Rahma, where Chama received refuge and support during her divorce. Stylistic elements, including rounded arches, ornamental frames, and ironwork, echo the old medina's architecture, grounding the design in the city's signature aesthetic.

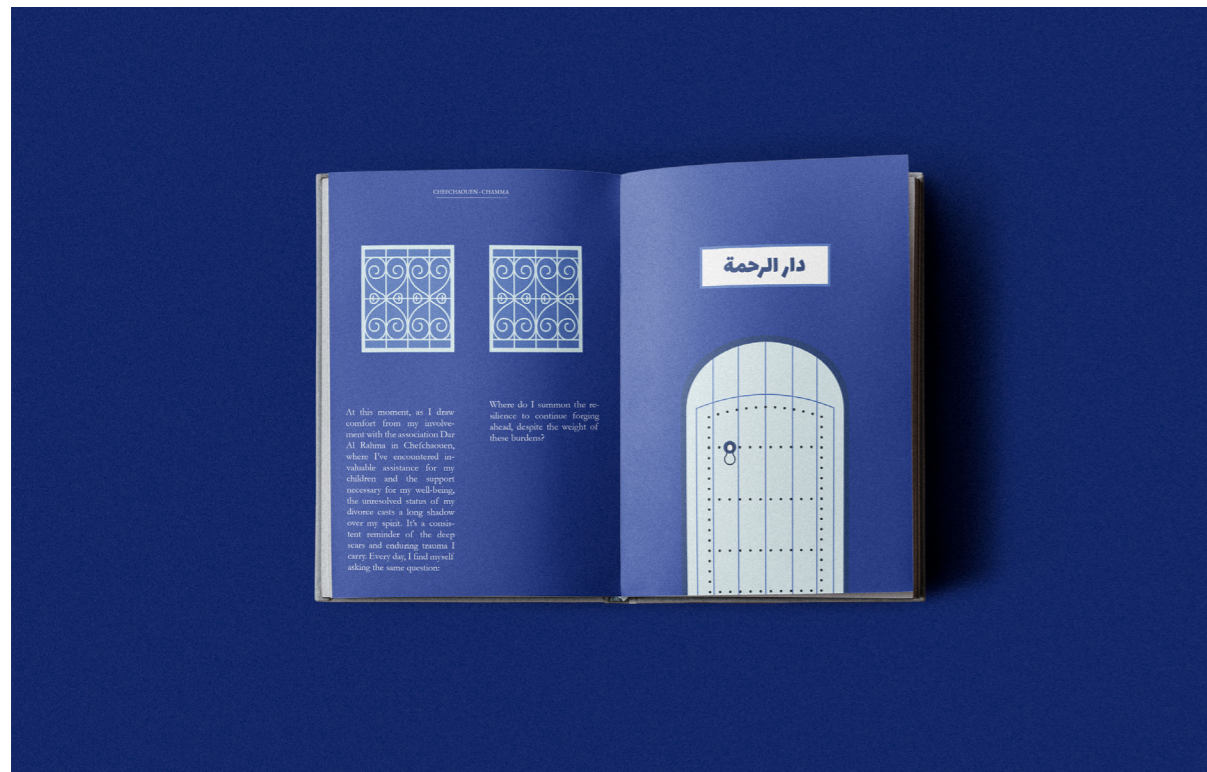


Figure 88. Chefchaouen: Chama — doorway illustration inspired by local architecture

Aya (Rabat) – Moroccan Traditional Objects

In Figure 93 (Rabat: Aya), a composed collage of minimal geometric forms depicts several Moroccan objects: a tajine (Figure 89), (a clay pot used for cooking traditional meals), pottery plates simplified into concentric circles (Figure 91), a prayer mat (Figure 90) in muted pastel tones, and a Moroccan-style pillow in soft green (Figure 92).

Also included is a verse from the Quran (4:34) that has historically been misinterpreted to suppress women's agency. Here, the design highlights the verse in an understated manner, maintaining the chosen color palette for Aya's chapter. A short caption clarifies that this verse, when accurately interpreted, aims to protect rather than subjugate women, thus reflecting the core argument against using religious texts as a means to limit women's autonomy.



Figure 89. Moroccan tajine
Product of ARTZIA Morocco via
Etsy

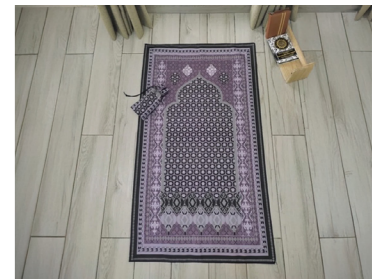


Figure 90. Moroccan prayer mat
Product of Aisha Boutique
Australia



Figure 93. Rabat: Aya — composed collage illustration



Figure 91. Moroccan pottery plate
Photograph taken by the author
Safi, Morocco



Figure 92. Moroccan cushion
Product photograph of
Greenhouse Interiors

Rkia (Benguerir) – Blue Taxi

In Figure 94, the design centers on a blue taxi, echoing the distinctive color of local cabs in Benguerir, as a symbolic backdrop to Rkia’s ordeal after experiencing sexual harassment.

Despite her efforts to seek help from family, friends, and legal authorities, she found little support.

Overlaid on the illustration is the statement, “Us men share the same flaw; it’s God’s given,” a phrase often invoked to rationalize male misconduct and diminish personal accountability.

By framing this problematic justification against the everyday scene of a taxi, the composition underscores how mundane public spaces can become sites of gender-based violence, perpetuated in part by cultural narratives that excuse or normalize harmful behavior.



Figure 94. Benguerir: Rkia — illustration featuring a blue taxi, inspired by local cab colors

Yamna (Tata) – Composition of Traditional Items

Figure 98 (Tata: Yamna) is divided into four minimalist panels, each featuring a culturally significant item in simple line art: a berrad (traditional Moroccan teapot for mint tea), (Figure 96), a tabseel touess (peacock-themed pottery plate), (Figure 95), a mahraz (traditional grinder), (Figure 97), and a celebratory Moroccan sayings arranged in circular text.

This modular layout acknowledges the layered significance of these items in daily life, while the limited color palette; rooted in blue and yellows; ensures each symbol remains clear and uncluttered.



Figure 98. Tata: Yamna — illustration divided into four minimalist panels



Figure 95. Moroccan taous plate
Photograph taken by the author



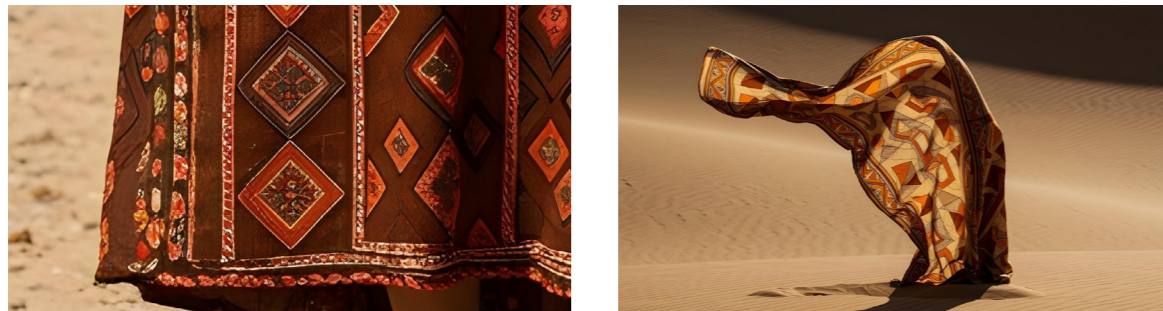
Figure 96. Moroccan teapot with traditional tea glasses
Photograph taken by the author



Figure 97. Moroccan mahraz (brass grinder)
Product photograph of eBay

Sultana (Laayoune) – Malfha Geometry & Cactus Juxtaposition

For Sultana's spread (Figure 99-101), the illustration incorporates geometric motifs inspired by the malfha, a distinctive Sahrawi garment worn by women in southern Morocco. Characterized by repetitive shapes and vibrant hues, the malfha's patterns mirror the desert backdrop of Laayoune and the region's broader cultural heritage. This focus on traditional geometric forms affirms the importance of clothing as both a personal statement and a tangible reflection of Laayoune's cultural legacy.



Figures 99–100. Moroccan malfha fabric textures
Images of Freepik



Figure 101. Laayoune: Sultana — illustration of malfha fabric with geometric patterns

Figure 102 juxtaposes the southern region's view of divorce, where a woman is celebrated for her resilience, with the broader Moroccan context, which often labels divorced women as "impatient" or "at fault."

A cactus (sabara) occupies the center, referencing the Moroccan Darija term sabar ("patience") and its pun masabrash ("she isn't patient"). Reminiscent of Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," this visual pun subverts assumptions by illustrating how a single cultural symbol, the cactus, can simultaneously signify patience and impatience, depending on the societal lens. Across these examples, minimalist design choices, whether in color selection, geometric outlines, or sparse backgrounds—direct attention toward the emotional realities and cultural weight of the women's experiences. Rather than cluttering the composition, the emphasis remains on personal narratives, honoring both individual testimonies and their Moroccan cultural context.

This aligns with hooks's (2000) insight that "stripping away layers of domination reveals the unmediated reality of oppressed voices" (p. 45), reaffirming the project's commitment to decolonizing design and amplifying women's stories.



Figure 102. Juxtaposition of perspectives on divorce in Morocco vs southern Sahara region

6.2.2 Geometric Authenticity vs. Colonial Stereotypes

Geometric patterns are integral to Islamic and Moroccan art, reflecting both mathematical precision and spiritual reflection.

Integrating region; specific motifs, such as hammam; inspired shapes for Zainab's Tangier or Amazigh jewelry references for Yamna's Tata (Figure 103) –Srayba avoids touristic clichés and instead honors the underlying cultural matrix of each region. Importantly, minimalism here is not introduced as a Western import but as a contextual adaptation.

Contemporary Moroccan artisans and digital artists often employ simplified motifs to merge tradition with modern tastes; evident on platforms such as Anou, an artisan; managed marketplace.

This practice affirms local pride while remaining accessible to global audiences that appreciate clean, refined visuals.



Figure 103. Yamna's Tata — Srayba necklace illustration
A traditional Amazigh necklace crafted from original agate, symbolizing emotional, physical, and intellectual balance. Often worn upon marriage, it represents a lifelong vow of love and understanding.

6.2.3 Contemporary Moroccan Minimalist Influencers and Artists

Hind Sahli

A Moroccan model and influencer, Hind Sahli (Figure 104) has garnered international acclaim for her innovative approach to blending contemporary minimalism with culturally embedded motifs. By collaborating with local designers on kaftans featuring streamlined geometric prints, she strives to modernize traditional garments while safeguarding their distinctive “Moroccan DNA” (Harper's Bazaar Arabia, n.d.). Sahli's online presence consistently highlights bold color blocks and subtly ornamental details, illustrating an artistic dialogue between honoring Morocco's heritage and embracing the evolving demands of global fashion. Beyond her modeling pursuits, she advocates for ethical production practices and community-based artisans, reflecting a broader movement in Moroccan design that values both cultural authenticity and modern reinterpretation, (Figure 105).



Figure 104. Poster of Hind Sahli
Source: Harper's Bazaar Qatar, used for academic purposes only



Figure 105. Hind Sahli featured in Harper's Bazaar Qatar — Winter 2024 issue
Photograph source: Harper's Bazaar Qatar, used for academic purposes only

@moroccan.minimalism (Instagram)

An account dedicated to minimalistic representations of Moroccan aesthetics, blending flat colors, simple outlines, and geometric shapes to depict landmarks, cultural icons, and everyday scenes. This approach underscores how strong cultural identity can be expressed through pared; down visuals that avoid stereotypes and excessive ornamentation.



Figures 106–109. Minimalist illustrations from @moroccan.minimalism (Instagram)
Source: Artist's Instagram page

Ghizlane Agzenai

A Casablanca; based visual artist recognized for her bold, large; scale paintings that merge geometric shapes with bright color blocks reminiscent of Moroccan zellige patterns. Despite the vibrant hues, her compositions remain clean and uncluttered, channeling local heritage through a distinctly modern, pared; down lens.



Figures 110–113. Artwork by Ghizlane Agzenai
Source: Artist's Instagram page

6.2.4 Merging Storytelling and Decolonizing Minimalism

Beyond aesthetic considerations, minimalism supports a decolonizing design ethos by avoiding exoticization and placing the women's narratives at the forefront.

According to Smith (1999), decolonizing methodologies "privilege indigenous values, aesthetics, and mediums" rather than exploiting them for external consumption. Here, minimalism serves as visual restraint, ensuring that each illustration enhances rather than overshadows the storytelling. Whether depicting Chefchouen's iconic blues or Tata's palm-fringed vistas, every design element functions as a subtle gateway into the narrative.

This approach aligns with feminist and decolonial principles:

Feminist: It removes superfluous layers (hooks, 2000) that might distract from personal testimonies, thereby foregrounding women's experiences.

Decolonial: It rejects portraying Moroccan culture as an "exotic spectacle," choosing instead a refined, modern style that respects local authenticity. Minimalism thus becomes more than a stylistic choice; it is a tool of amplification, ensuring that the essence of each region and each woman's voice shines through without resorting to clichéd or ornamental visuals.

6.3 From Practice to Broader Implications

This body of practical work demonstrates how culturally grounded minimalism can advance a decolonial agenda by honoring and elevating Moroccan women's stories.

By weaving local motifs and personal narratives into a streamlined aesthetic, the project not only challenges Western design paradigms but also reclaims local visual expressions (Tunstall, 2013). Operating within a minimalist design framework draws on historical and religious artistic influences, including Islamic art traditions, where economy of form often highlights spiritual or cultural significance.

In this context, minimalism becomes a deliberate choice that foregrounds the essence of Moroccan women's experiences, rather than drowning out their voices with extraneous visual elements (Piktochart, 2024). Beyond formal aesthetics, this approach underscores the potential of design as a medium for social critique and advocacy. The layering of localized symbols, such as motifs drawn from Amazigh art or the interplay of Arabic calligraphy with Latin scripts, functions as a narrative device that both unifies and diversifies the representation of Moroccan culture. These convergences of visual languages actively subvert the dominance of globalized design standards, instead centering indigenous knowledge systems and local aesthetic sensibilities. In doing so, the work illuminates how minimalism can be culturally situated, resonating more deeply with its intended audience and validating the experiences and histories it aims to represent.

The broader implications extend well beyond the realm of graphic design. By integrating Arabic typography alongside Latin scripts, the project bridges cultural divides, disrupts linguistic hierarchies, and invites viewers to engage with Moroccan cultures on their own terms (Chahine, 2012).

This inclusive approach serves as both a linguistic and visual negotiation, a reminder that multilingualism and multiculturalism are central to Morocco's identity.

In resisting monolingual or Western-biased design norms, such work contributes to the larger process of decolonizing public spaces and visual cultures, reinforcing local narratives in the face of historical erasures.

Looking ahead, the conclusion will synthesize these insights, positioning this methodology as a potential model for other post-colonial or historically marginalized societies seeking to reclaim and reimagine their visual identities. By prioritizing localized symbolism, culturally relevant design principles, and an inclusive linguistic palette, similar practices can foster a sense of empowerment and agency for communities around the world. This reorientation of design practice, away from universalizing Western conventions and toward context-specific narratives, highlights the transformative power of culturally grounded minimalism as a tool for social justice, collective memory, and broader decolonial efforts.

Chapter 07



Conclusion

Conclusion

Revisiting the Research Questions

This dissertation set out to explore how a decolonizing approach to graphic design can reshape perceptions of Moroccan women, particularly by centering their stories and cultural heritage.

The main research question asked:

“How does the decolonization of design influence societal perceptions of Moroccan women, especially in relation to colonial biases and gender stereotypes?”

Building on a mixed-methods examination of women’s experiences (Chapters 4 & 5) and culminating in a minimalist yet culturally grounded practical design (Chapter 6), this project has demonstrated that visual storytelling, when aligned with local motifs and responsive to women’s lived realities, can challenge reductive narratives and promote more nuanced, empowering representations.

Recent Moudawana Reforms

While finalizing this dissertation, on December 25, 2024, Morocco announced significant reforms to its Family Code (Moudawana).

Although some sections of this study critique the earlier version of the code, these critiques were retained because, as with the 2004 Moudawana reforms, legal changes alone have not guaranteed an immediate shift in cultural attitudes or public opinion.

Deeply rooted social norms and religious interpretations continue to shape how laws are enforced and perceived. During a press conference in Rabat, Justice Minister Abdellatif Ouahbi shared the main points of these reforms, approved by the Higher Council of Ulemas.

The changes cover marriage age, legal guardianship, polygamy, divorce procedures, alimony, property transfer, custody, and inheritance,

all described as central to building “a new Moudawana for today’s Morocco” (Zouiten, 2024).

Among the most notable amendments is the strengthened legal guardianship for mothers who have custody of their children.

Under the previous code, divorced mothers who remarried risked losing custody altogether and were not permitted to make key decisions such as changing schools or obtaining passports.

Now, these changes grant mothers continued custody after remarriage and offer them primary rights over their children’s affairs (Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, 2023). Reforms concerning polygamy place stricter limits on the practice, requiring spousal consent in contract form and permitting polygamy only under exceptional circumstances (Wilson Center, 2024).

Connecting Legal Shifts to Cultural Transformations

While these legal changes mark progress, codified laws alone do not guarantee an immediate shift in societal attitudes.

As with the 2004 Moudawana reforms, robust awareness campaigns, grassroots outreach, and sustained communal engagement remain essential. Cultural norms, religious interpretations, and gender relations evolve gradually (Centre for Public Impact, 2016).

Ultimately, advancing women’s rights depends on both women and men challenging harmful stereotypes, fostering open dialogue, and building a supportive environment from within (Global Human Rights Defense, 2024).

Implications of a Decolonizing Design Approach

Moreover, the minimalist and culturally aligned design strategies applied throughout this project demonstrate how visual storytelling; deeply informed by local heritage; can support transformative goals without resorting to exoticizing or colonizing tropes. Each woman’s story illustrates how tradition and modernity can evolve in parallel, and how design, advocacy, and academic research can converge to spotlight marginalized voices, safeguard cultural authenticity, and instigate meaningful social progress (International Gender Geography,

2024). This directly addresses the project's sub-question of whether decolonized design can amplify Moroccan women's narratives in a way that counters dominant stereotypes; showing that integrating indigenous aesthetics and minimalism can indeed reshape audience perceptions. Yet, as witnessed after the 2004 Moudawana revisions, genuine impact hinges on community awareness, acceptance, and practical implementation of these laws.

Persistent issues such as sexual harassment, oppression under the guise of culture or religion, and other forms of abuse are not restricted to one nation or system.

Addressing them requires empathy, creativity, and continuous dialogue, often one conversation at a time. Sometimes, changing just one woman's or one man's perspective is a profoundly significant step; a spark that can illuminate an entire community's potential for transformation.

Limitations and Future Directions

This dissertation acknowledges several limitations.

First, the relatively small number of participants (six) and the selection of specific Moroccan regions restrict the breadth of perspectives, potentially overlooking the full diversity of women's experiences across the country.

Second, although the study draws on existing cultural references, high-quality visual materials particularly photographs or detailed illustrations were often difficult to locate. For example, items like the sryaba, a local craft known predominantly in certain areas, proved elusive both online and on-site, complicating efforts to accurately represent or validate these cultural artifacts.

This shortage of reliable visual documentation underscores a broader challenge of researching and portraying regionally specific traditions that remain largely undocumented in academic or popular resources. A further limitation lies in the language barrier encountered during interviews and secondary research, especially regarding the emotional nuances and personal reflections shared by participants. While translation support and local insights mitigated some of these issues, subtle cultural inflections could have been lost or misunderstood.

Additionally, the design prototypes, though informed by participant feedback and cultural motifs, could be strengthened by more extensive, iterative collaboration with Moroccan artisans or women's associations for deeper contextual validation.

In terms of future research, broadening the scope to include larger and more diverse samples, such as rural versus urban communities and Amazigh versus Arab populations, would offer a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences.

Comparative studies in broader Pan-African or Middle Eastern contexts could also illuminate how decolonial design principles function across different linguistic, cultural, and sociopolitical landscapes.

Engaging more deeply with local creative and community networks, while also addressing gaps in documentation and translation, would likely yield richer, more nuanced outcomes that further amplify women's voices.

Personal Reflection

The purpose of this dissertation has never been to champion a single type of woman, ethnicity, or expression of womanhood. Women's experiences are far too multifaceted, and I recognize that speaking universally on behalf of "all women" would be extraordinarily broad in scope. Instead, I chose to center on Moroccan women, drawing on my familiarity with local culture, language, and lived realities. Even so, the larger message remains clear:



**no matter
how a woman
dresses,
believes, or
appears, she
deserves full
and equal
rights.**

At the heart of my work lies a decolonizing design approach; one that emphasizes culturally anchored aesthetics, minimal ornamentation, and genuine respect for local narratives.

This mirrors the care required in accurately interpreting Qur'anic verses, which must be contextualized both linguistically and historically. When sacred texts are approached superficially, misreading can fuel oppression; similarly, design detached from its cultural context risks becoming an exoticizing trope. By adopting minimalist illustration strategies grounded in Moroccan motifs, I sought to recenter women's stories, rejecting foreign frameworks that overshadow indigenous artistry and perspectives.

Interestingly, the Qur'an itself displays numerical consistencies that many view as evidence of meticulous design or cosmic balance: "men" and "women" are mentioned an equal number of times, the word "day" appears 365 times, and "week" appears 7 times. Yet these symbols of equilibrium often go unnoticed when people focus on surface-level interpretations or literal translations.

I believe there is a pressing need for credible, well-informed scholars who can elucidate the spirit of these verses and challenge distortions that justify discrimination. This educational angle, coupled with the strong influence of legal reforms, can enrich a more enhanced understanding of gender roles; one that uplifts women's rights, agency, and dignity under an Islamic framework.

Reflecting on the entire process; from interviewing Moroccan women and exploring diverse regions, to integrating local colors, shapes, and minimalism in design;

I have come to appreciate how academic research, policy reform, and cultural discourse can converge to spark genuine progress. Even when laws are revised, deep-seated social norms call for empathetic dialogues and everyday collaboration.

Changing one person's mind, correcting one erroneous interpretation, or hosting one open community discussion can accumulate into a transformative wave that illuminates gender equality across Morocco and beyond.

My hope is that this dissertation contributes to a broader conversation that champions women's voices, clarifies the true spirit of the Qur'an's teachings, and nurtures an environment where men and women collaborate as equals.

Ultimately, we are all human; and in that shared humanity, there is immense potential for solidarity, creativity, and respect. By honoring indigenous aesthetics, placing women's experiences at the forefront, and reading sacred texts with humility and depth, I believe we can move steadily toward a future where every woman's story is validated, her rights are upheld, and her identity is embraced without compromise.



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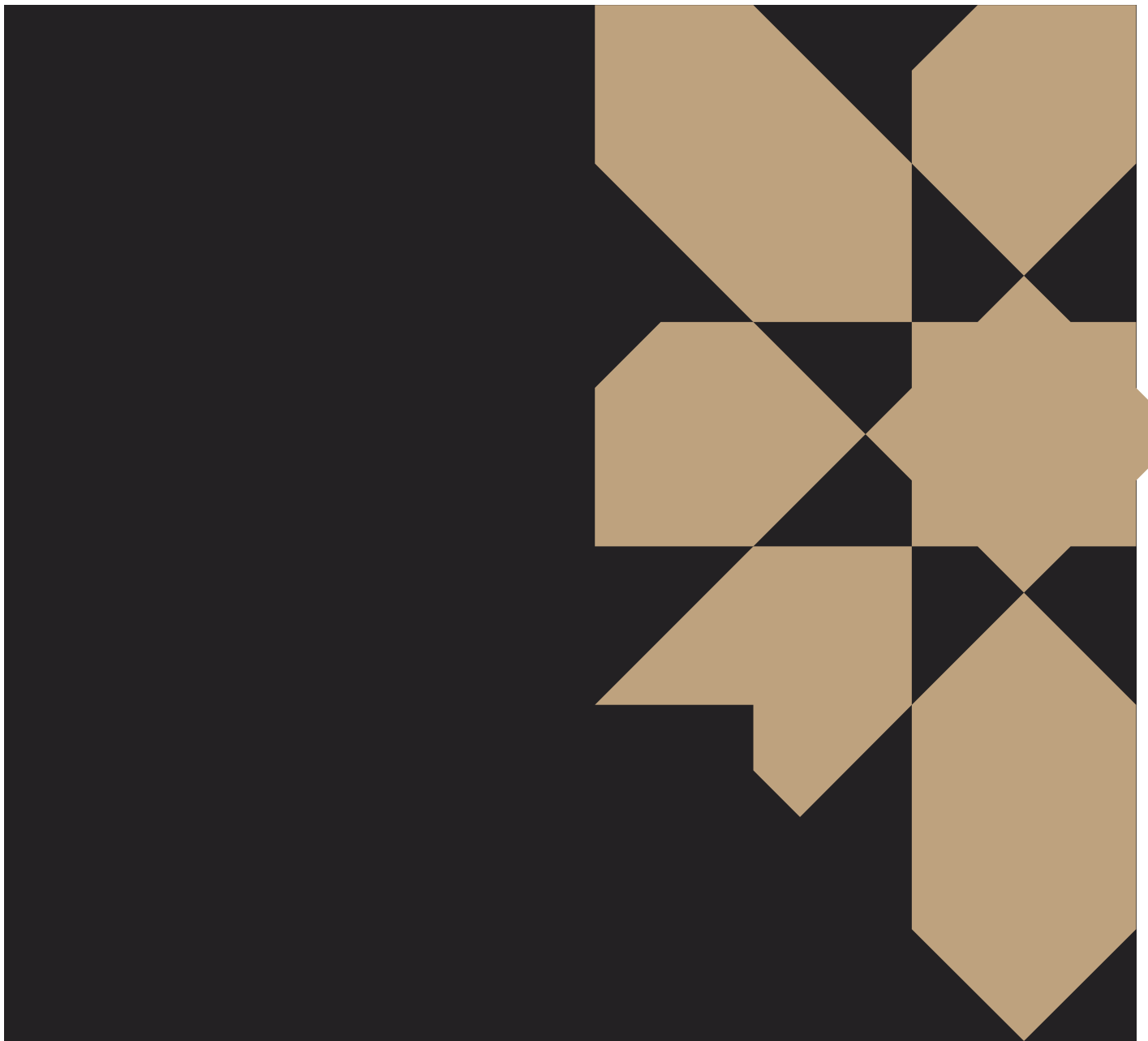
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