From taboo to transnational political issue: 
Violence against women in Algeria

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Synopsis

This article considers the way in which women are confined in their roles in social and cultural reproduction through violent acts of discipline. Through an examination of the case of Algeria, a society torn by civil violence in recent years, I argue that in order to understand the root causes of violence against women, we need a fuller understanding of the broader historical and social context. In the case of Algeria key factors are gendered discourses about power and domination, social space and the formation of national identity. In recent years they have been contested through collective acts of resistance, with transnational dimensions. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

This article considers the way in which women are confined in their roles in social and cultural reproduction through violent acts of discipline. Through an examination of the case of Algeria, a society torn by civil violence in recent years, I will argue that in order to understand the root causes of violence against women, we need a fuller understanding of the broader historical and social context. In the case of Algeria key factors are gendered discourses about power and domination, social space and the formation of national identity. In recent years they have been contested through collective acts of resistance, with transnational dimensions.

This action has given rise to new initiatives on the part of public authorities to end violence against women in Algeria, which identifies a specific form of violence used to ‘keep women in their place’. This multifaceted issue of violence against women has been transformed from a taboo into a campaigning issue, which has taken on transnational dimensions.

Definitions

By violence I mean the ‘...intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation’ (World Health Organisation, 2002, p. 38). Violence can take different, often interrelated forms which may be understood as overlapping so that specific acts may be multi-causal. This way of thinking about violence may help us to avoid reductive dichotomies such as public/private, physical/structural or thinking in terms of hierarchies of violence.
Algerian debates about violence have given rise to three main and overlapping categories: social, political and absolute violence. Each form of violence rests upon the toleration of violence within the family which until recently has been seen as ‘such a trivial topic which no one has thought to raise it as a problem’ (Djerbal-lamarene, 1997). “Social violence” arises in conditions of ‘profound and rapid social change’ where key social institutions such as the family and education are under stress (Chaulet, 2000, p. 10), while ‘political violence’ is bound up with ‘internal struggles around central and local power’ which are connected to exogenous factors (Chaulet, 2000, p. 10). The third form is ‘absolute violence’ and is based on the dehumanisation of those to whom it is directed, examples would be ethnic or religious violence which produces highly visible, ritualistic blood-letting aiming at the purification of society (Chaulet, 2000, p. 11). Many Algerian discussions return to the historical experience of colonial violence to contextualise these contemporary forms.

Violence implies other concepts particularly power, domination and discipline. Subjects about which we cannot speak or taboo are often bound up with wider issues of power, domination and conformity. To understand the power relations that lie beneath acts of violence against women, we are concerned with theories of power as domination, ‘power over’ rather than ‘power to’ (Rowlands, 1997). Power may be covert, so that it may involve the hiding or erasing of certain issues, Steven Lukes’ identification of the multiple dimensions of power thus help us to understand how certain forms of violence are ‘taboo’ subjects (Lukes, 2004).

The first part of this article will focus on the way in which power as violence has been used to regulate the lives of women in Algeria. Regulation, in its more punitive forms may involve discipline particularly, keeping women in a ‘proper place’. The feminist formulation of ‘power to’ or power as capacity will help me to explain how women’s organisations have resisted violence by drawing attention to it. Organising together through associations and other mobilisations have helped women to have a concentrated impact on the problem of violence and to make the most of the shifting terms of discourse about violence in society.

Feminists have theorised the disciplining of women in terms of intersections between women’s role and the construction of national identity. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis distinguish between women as the biological reproducers of ethnic groups, as reproducers of the boundaries between such groups, as having a central role in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity, as signifiers of ethnic/national differences and women’s role in cultural reproduction (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989). In order to ensure that they fulfil these roles (which may not coincide with their individual interest or inclination) women are subject to discipline, sometimes from other women, such as senior members of their families. The form that this discipline takes may vary according to circumstance, but violence is the extreme way in which it is enforced. It operates as a way of maintaining the dominance of certain groups of people and of certain values. Algeria is not unique in this of course, but it does offer us clues to the way in which this control operates through a series of discourses and practices, which we can trace back to Algeria’s experience of colonialism.

My attempt to understand more about this violence begins (as do many of the Algerian analyses) by examining some of the historical discourse surrounding the taboo against even acknowledging violence against women before describing the process by which this has been lifted. I will analyze how women’s organisations have shifted their priorities in recent years to focus on violence. At this point it should be possible to identify some of the issues involved in analysing the transnational dynamics involved in these movements.

**Colonial violence**

Debates about Algerian society almost always refer to history, notably the country’s experience of violent colonialism. While I reject the idea that Algerian society is intrinsically violent, I would agree that there are ‘elements of continuity, while there are no inevitable historical connections’ with its violent colonial past (Remaoun, 2000, p. 34).

A short historical review can throw some light on the specific power struggles surrounding women’s role in the family during the colonial period in Algeria which began in 1830 and was more or less complete by 1870 (Charrad, 2001; Stora, 1991). This overview shows how colonialism involved the massive displacement of the Algerian population, and how the seclusion of women was identified as a major obstacle to the French conquest firstly because it meant that the family sphere was beyond their control and women as mothers and grandmothers could pass on alternative stories, helping to form a narrative of resistance. Later secluded or veiled women were one marker of the boundary between the indigenous and the settler population. The colonialists viewed the Algerian population as less than human and political violence assumed ‘absolute’ forms. We can only speculate about the impact of the massive displacement of population on gender relations within
the family, but the stress on social institutions would have created the conditions for what we have identified earlier as social violence.

From the initial invasion the French realized that to conquer Algeria they would need to subdue the whole population:

'We are faced not by a real army, but by the population itself. Once we realized this, we also knew that as long as this population remains as hostile to us as it is today, we will need as many armed troops there in peacetime as we would in war, because it is about less than defeating a government than holding down a people.' (Tocqueville, 1847)

The French drove the Algerians off their land using a scorched earth policy which actions were sometimes documented by the perpetrators, notably, General Pelissier (Aggoun & Rivoire, 2004, p. 4; Djebar, 1985, pp. 98–115). One Lieutenant Colonel involved in such actions wrote: ‘You ask me what we do with the women we capture. We keep some as hostages, some are exchanged for horses, and the rest are sold by auction like beasts of burden’ (Maspero, 1993, p. 193). Highly visible acts of repression were used to respond to resistance by a largely destitute population, notably the burning to death of thousands of clan members in caves where they were sheltering. Their bodies were not buried but exhibited as an example to others.

Many Europeans settled in Algeria, forming some 13% of the total population compared to 6–8% among its neighbours, Tunisia and Morocco. Between 1830 and 1849 it was estimated that Algeria lost a quarter of its population, in the period up to independence in 1962 there was repeated famine, disease and armed conflict (Stora, 1991, p. 24). Colonialism intruded far into the social fabric in a way that made defence of family life crucial for the maintenance of indigenous identity, but which reinforced silences around women’s subordinate position. As Tocqueville implied, no section of Algerian society was spared the experience of this dehumanizing violence in which people were treated ‘like beasts of burden’ and their social norms and culture trampled upon. The seclusion of women was seen as crucial to Algerian resistance: ‘the Arabs elude us because they conceal their women from our gaze’ (Bugeaud cited in Clancy-Smith, 1998, p. 154).

At the same time we also know from historical research of women who led armed resistance in the mid-nineteenth century, notably Lalla Fatma N’Soumer (Dejeux, 1987, pp. 157–169).

The writer Assia Djebar illustrates the fascination of the colonialist with elite secluded women by taking Delacroix’s painting Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement as an example of orientalism in French colonial art. During a three-day visit to Algiers in 1832 Delacroix had been admitted to the ‘harem’ of the chief engineer of the port of Algiers, where he observed the engineer’s female relatives and later painted them from memory. Assia Djebar ironically cites his comments after he had visited the harem:

'‘It is beautiful! It is as it was in Homer’s time! Women in the gynaecium looking after children, weaving wool or embroidering marvellous textiles. This is woman as I understand her!’ (Djebar, 1980 p. 147)\(^1\)

Delacroix’s work evokes the colonialist’s idea of the eroticised, feminised, timeless, Orient in which women represented an obstacle to conquest, with all its erotic overtones (Delacroix uses the term ‘penetration’ when he enters the harem).

During the colonial period many photographs and postcards were produced containing representations of Algerian women in different stages of dress and undress: the veiled woman became ‘an object of fantasy, excitement and desire’ (Donnell, 2003, pp. 122–123). Clancy-Smith argues that ‘the construction of French Algeria was as much the forging of a gaze… fixed upon Muslim women as it was the assembling of mechanisms for political and economic control’ (Clancy-Smith, 1998, p. 155).

Thus from the beginning of colonialism the conflict between the coloniser and the colonised was played out over the veiled/unveiled bodies of women. We see discourses about the veiling of women deployed with undertones of violence (symbolic, erotic and physical) as part of the project of colonial domination. Women’s bodies were significant in resisting the impact of colonial settlement. In 1949 Rene Maunier wrote:

‘Their societies (are) broken up, their unity destroyed, their traditions swamped, their customary law obliterated … (This) means the destruction of the tribal order, the dissolution of the ancestral group, which often forfeits even its name, even the memory of its past exploits. Colonial officials set up indirect rule by enlisting the help of tribal leaders in an effort to create a group of petty functionaries faithful to the French’. (Maunier, 1949 cited in Charrad, 2001, p. 4)

In the face of such social disruption, family life was one area which Algerians could preserve untouched by French colonialism, reproducing ‘tradition’ through local customary or Islamic family law. It was represented as a haven from the destructive changes taking
place, and later by the nationalists as a bastion of Algerian culture. This was clearly expressed by Kateb Yacine (2004, p. 37): ‘I have always been affected by the question of Algerian women in history. From my earliest age, she seemed to me to be primordial. All I have lived, everything I have done until today has always been based on what my mother taught me (...) language, the awakening of my consciousness, it is the mother who makes the child speak its first words, she is the person who constructs his world’.

Writing in the 1950s, Franz Fanon pursues this point, arguing that the French administrators identified a matriarchal structure beneath the patriarchal pattern of Algerian society. He summarises their strategy for domination which focused on women: ‘If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must look for them behind the veil under which they are hidden’ and concludes “the Algerian woman would support the Western penetration into the native society” (Fanon, 1965 (first published 1959), p. 20).

The veil was central to the discourse about women. Fanon (1965, pp. 15–16) writes, ‘In the beginning the veil was a mechanism of resistance but its value for the social group remained very strong. The veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria’. This was epitomised by the events of 13th May 1958 during a military-settler insurrection in Algiers which led to the fall of the French fourth republic and the return of De Gaulle to power. The colonial press claimed that thousands of Muslim women came spontaneously to the public squares of Algiers and unveiled themselves to cries of Vive l’Algérie Française (Fanon, 1965, p. 40). The pro-settler L’Echo d’Alger of 19th May 1958 reported ‘Thousands of Muslim women have affirmed their wish to develop within the French nation’. Under a picture of a crowd of girls and women is the caption: ‘Successive delegations of Muslim women came to the Ministry of Algeria. Many of them removed their veil. On every face was joy and emotion’. Accounts by pro-Front de Liberation National (FLN) sources described the events as ‘Operation veil’ and argued that more women than ever were wearing veils, as a protest against the forced unveiling. They argued ‘They do not need “emancipation”. They assumed their full dignity as Algerian citizens from the first days of the Algerian Revolution, because from the outset they were at the sides of the combatants’ (Oeuvre Collectif, 1965, p. 50). The event has assumed the status of a myth, described by many since as an act of ‘symbolic importance’ (Helie-Lucas, 1993, p. 208).

Men dominated the means by which nationalist discourse was articulated, and in this case they appropriated women’s language and symbols. Women who wore veils were not consulted about the way in which they were represented but rather, were represented by others in a way which claimed as legitimate a misrecognition of their actions. While Algerian women supported the nationalist movement their own aspirations were claimed, but used to maintain masculine dominance. This illustrates the way in which symbolic violence operates:

‘A gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling’. (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 2)

The obsession with unveiling persisted to the end of the colonial period. Another well-known example is of the French military photographer Marc Garanger who in 1960 was ordered to forcibly unveil and photograph 2000 women living in centres de regroupement, for identification purposes (Bailey and Tawadros, 2003, p. 38). He wrote later:

‘In each village, the postmaster would call up the residents. It was the faces of the women that struck me most. At first the women lifted their veils, some left them on their shoulders but kept their turban on their heads. The officer insisted that they took that off too. It was a terrible humiliation for them to appear with their heads bare in front of French soldiers. Most of them glared at me. Their pictures show extraordinary distress ... I was the first to witness their silent but fierce protest. In return I want my photographs to bear witness to them’ (Garanger, 1982 cited in Bailey and Tawadros, 2003, p. 87)

Algerian women took an active part in the war of liberation but it is widely accepted that the leadership of the FLN were at best equivocal about their role. Attitudes varied considerably, from the conservative to the extremely open. Some documents from the war suggest that the Armée de Libération National (ALN) feared that the women’s presence would be disruptive; they would make the men think of other things than revolution. There are accounts of women who had professional qualifications (doctors, nurses) but who were relegated to menial tasks even though they were better educated than their male superiors (Amrane, 1991; Meynier, 2002). The defining documents of the
new Algeria, the *Charte de la Soummam* (1956) and the Tripoli programme (1961) defined women’s spheres of activity and placed them at the bottom of the list of priorities for an independent Algeria. Women had no positions of responsibility in the national command, and this continued after independence.

During the period of colonialism and the war of liberation discourses and practices grew up around an idealised model of Algerian womanhood. Both the coloniser and the colonised contributed to this view, manipulating women for their different ends. The coloniser subjected women to symbolic violence when unveiling or photographing violated their privacy. But when women took the defiant step of joining the armed struggle as *moudjahidates*, the leadership expected them to postpone their aspirations for equal rights – to wait until later – ‘a patriarchal time-zone’ (Enloe, 2004, p. 215). It is however, widely recognised that the role of women in the anti-colonial struggle was an exceptional one which was to provide a model for later generations of independent women (Bouatta, 1994).

After 1962 it was important for the new republic to present a united image through the idea of the million martyrs who died for its existence. Although women’s rights were relegated to the back burner in favour of nation building, some voices were raised. In 1966 the official *Union Nationale des Femmes Algériennes* (UNFA) stated: “We must fight against... erroneous interpretations of Islam, traditional family structures,... [and help] put in place family structures adapted to the modern world, and a family code that conforms to our Algerian and Muslim personality as well as to the demands of the modern world” (Charrad, 2001, p. 6).

The post-independence constitution guarantees equal rights of women and men in Article 29: ‘All citizens are equal before the law. No discrimination shall prevail because of birth, race, sex, opinion or any other personal or social condition or circumstance’ and in Article 31 which states ‘The aim of the institutions is to ensure equality of rights and duties of all citizens, men and women, by removing the obstacles, which hinder the progress of human beings and impede the effective participation of all in the political, economic, social and cultural life’. Algerian governments sought to balance interests which demanded a rhetoric of equality with more conservative interests which wanted to re-establish Islam in the socio-legal institutions, most importantly through the family or personal status code, based on the *shari’a*. The Family Code (la loi n°84-11 du 9 juin 1984) provided a legal framework for man’s dominance over women. As the legal head of the household, the man could repudiate his wives who would then be forced to leave the matrimonial home. A woman’s consent to her marriage and other contractual arrangements was mediated by a male guardian who could reject her choice of husband. The code legalised polygamy and forbade adoption.

For 20 years it has been the most contested legal text in Algeria, underpinning repressive social practices, rooted in a conservative interpretation of Islam and backed by patriarchal society. Women’s associations and political parties have been at the forefront of agitation for its abolition or fundamental reform. Some pointed out that the code was itself unconstitutional and incompatible with Algeria’s international obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In March 2005 the code was partly reformed by presidential decree, but women’s organizations still hotly dispute the continuation of the principle of guardianship.

The ‘civil war’ of the 90s

By the 1980s and 90s it had become impossible to ignore violence against women, because of the scale and enormity of the problem. The sort of social dislocation, which is associated with a growth of what we have identified earlier as ‘social violence’, was certainly present during this period, but little attention was paid to violence against women in the family. There was however a growth in violent acts of discipline designed to safeguard public morals, particularly directed against women who were seen as behaving improperly in public. Many of these acts were associated with the political aspirations of radical Islamists. As the crisis deepened into a virtual civil war in the 1990s, intellectuals (men and women) and later whole communities became the target for assassinations designed by their exhibitionist brutality to terrify. This is what the Algerian commentators describe as ‘absolute’ violence (Chaulet, 2000). During this period the women’s organisations which had developed to resist the Family Code began to focus on this violence, and they played an exceptional part in documenting it.

The late 1980s was marked by escalating public attacks on women by groups of men, often inflamed by the sermons of radical Islamists. For instance leading members of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) argued: ‘A woman’s role is the reproduction of Muslims. If she rejects this role, she is subverting God’s order and dries up the source of Islam’ (Interview in Horizons 23 février 1989, cited in Saadi, 1991, p. 38). Women who seemed to challenge accepted stereotypes became special targets: especially those who were public employees
or who were unveiled. Women living on their own were particular targets: in June 1989 Saléha Dekkiche a divorced woman living alone with her children in the southern town of Ouargla, was stoned by a mob and her house burned down. Her youngest son, Ali, a disabled child of four was killed in the fire (Attaf, 1995; Boudjeddra, 1992). Young, educated women were a particular target: in 1990–1991 women in university halls of residence were harassed by groups of men who imposed a curfew on them after 6:00 p.m. Anyone opposing this was ‘corrected’ with the aid of a whip or bicycle chains (Saadi, 1991, p. 117).

Growing violence against women forced the issue out into the open and in response Algerian women’s organizations slightly shifted their priorities. In the 1980s their focus had been the repeal of the Family Code. While this remains a priority, a focus on violence against women enabled them to work on an issue that united women, and it became an important factor in building capacities of resistance, documenting the violence and bringing it to the attention of international human rights organizations (Amnesty International, 1997; Assima, 1995; Mehdid, 1996; Women Living Under Muslim Laws, 1995–6). Amnesty International reported in 1997:

‘eleven women teachers were slaughtered in front of their pupils by an armed group outside the Ain Adden school in Sfizef (south of Mascara). Armed groups such as the GLA have in the past killed teachers and issued death threats both against teachers of a specific subject, like the French language, and against teachers in general. The targeting of women by armed opposition groups has increased since the beginning of the conflict. One of the first women to be killed by such groups was Karima Belhadj, a 20-year-old secretary at the Direction Générale de la Sureté nationale (DGSN), who was shot dead near her home in the Eucalyptus suburb of Algiers in January 1993. Katia Bengana, a 17-year-old school student, was shot dead near her home in Meftah (Bliida). She previously received death threats for refusing to wear, and speaking out, against the hidjab. ... Civil servants, wives and relatives of members of the security forces, journalists, artists, women’s rights activists, newspapers and cigarette vendors, hairdressers and beauticians, and many others have been the target of death threats, which have contributed to increasing the atmosphere of fear and terror among the population’ (Amnesty International, 1997, p. 18)

There was also widespread abduction and rape of women by armed opposition groups, especially in rural areas. More than 2000 women reported being raped in 5 years of conflict according to the Algerian Ministry of the Interior in 1998 (Human Rights Watch, 1998, p. 4). Given the social implications of the shame and dishonour involved, this is certainly an underestimation.

In the mid 1990s, Amnesty International documented many abductions of women particularly in country areas. They were held by armed Islamist militia, to be violated, beaten and forced to perform domestic tasks for the men. In some cases these kidnappings took place with the connivance of members of their own families. Many of these women managed to escape but they were unable to secure any support and were ‘therefore damaged by the initial rape, but also by the shame and stigma which separates them from their families’ (Amnesty International/FILDH, 1997, pp. 20–21).

Violence against women since the Concorde Civile

Towards the end of the 1990s the security situation has become more ‘normal’, a peace process began, and in 1999 a Concorde Civile was ratified (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2004). However, spectacular attacks on women have continued and illustrate the continuing problem while also suggesting that women’s campaigning is beginning to make an impact.

On 13 July 2001 some 300 men carried out a violent attack on single working women living in the new oil town of Hassi-Messaoud in southern Algeria after a local imam had denounced them as prostitutes who were ‘harming the morals of the locality’ (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 11). The crowd of men sexually assaulted and raped the women, cut their faces, stabbed them with knives and burned their houses. Observers recalled attacks committed on women in the worst times of the internal conflict. Newspapers reported that the police failed to intervene until hours after the attack had begun, few of the perpetuators were arrested and the prosecution was seriously delayed (Amnesty International, 2004). This was not an isolated event: later in the same month, three women living alone were similarly attacked by a group of men in the town of Tebessa (NE of Algeria near the Tunisian frontier) on two occasions. It did however, give rise to substantial mobilisation by women’s organisations. Some went to the towns involved to show solidarity, find out what help they could offer and to make a careful record of the events
which enabled them to bring pressure to bear on the Algerian authorities.7

When the case finally came to court in June 2004, only five of the women were there to confront the defendants. This was a painful and difficult experience for them, especially when the court dropped a number of the charges. Under pressure from the women and their supporters, the government appealed against the initial verdict and a new trial took place in December 2004. While three of the accused were acquitted, three others were condemned to terms of imprisonment of 8, 6 and 3 years with fines to be paid to the victims. The women were not satisfied and are contemplating a legal appeal. They have asked President Bouteflika for help in their ‘rehabilitation’. The trial was covered prominently in several national newspapers: one account conveying the emotional atmosphere of the court uses the words of one of the victims, Fatiha: ‘I still feel dirty. I am going crazy because of this nightmare – why? What have I done to deserve this? They have buried me alive... those two have broken my life for ever’. The jury were in tears. The government’s representative stated ‘these actions have brought shame on Algeria and have sent us back to the Stone Age. On that night of 13th July 2001, Algerian women were terribly violated in the name of Islam. No Muslim on earth can accept or tolerate these barbaric acts. Justice requires the most severe sentence commensurate with this savage cruelty. The fact that the other victims were not here does not affect the culpability of the accused’.8

Since the civil conflict of the 1990s there has been a growing perception that violence against women is a public concern, a social problem which should be tackled by political authorities. The women who had been attacked in Hassi-Messaoud were strongly supported at the outset by different associations of women, and by human rights organisations – such as the Ligue Algérien des droits de l’homme (sic), political parties (the MDS, FFS and the RCD), the federation of trade unions and even a Marseille-based association Algérie– Méditerranée who came to the trial to show their solidarity. The involvement of the government is also significant, with the statement of social responsibility, insisting that the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam used to inflame the attackers was inappropriate. Algeria has come under constant pressure from the United Nations, the European Union and international human rights organisations for its position on women (especially on the Family Code) and there are signs of some (limited) moves to improve the situation.

We know from global studies that violence against women (mainly defined as interpersonal violence) is serious, widespread and underreported and that the levels of reported violence tend to be only the tip of the iceberg (Heise, Raikes, Watts, & Zwi, 1994; World Health Organisation, 2002). Following this initiative, which strengthened the pressure exerted by women’s groups, in 2003–2004 the Algerian Institut national de la santé publique (INSP) conducted a major study on violence against women. The underlying aim was to explore the response of public bodies to the needs of women who had experienced violence. The ministries of health, justice, police and victim support agencies (écoute et accueil) at national and wilaya (local authority) level provided information to the survey (Institut Nationale de Santé Publique, 2005, p. 14).

Some 9033 women who had reported violence took part in the survey, more than half of whom had been attacked at home. Two-thirds were married, but a high proportion (slightly less than one-third) of the women who had been physically attacked were single. Some were single mothers, others were widows or divorced and the majority were young and unmarried (three-quarters were under the age of 45 at the time of the attack). This fits into a general pattern whereby single women in particular are identified as ‘in need of discipline’ so that they conform to prescribed patterns of behaviour and serve as a model for future generations.

More than a half of the women had secondary or further education and 19% were in paid employment: about one-third of Algerian women are in paid work (Institut Nationale de Santé Publique, 2005, p. 50). While the general status of women in Algeria is improving slowly (fertility rates and maternal mortality rates are falling while the average age at marriage is increasing) about 40% of women are not literate. Those who do attend school do very well – representing 55% of successful candidates at school leaving exams in 1996. Women’s work is concentrated in the public sector, especially the caring professions (CNES, 1998, pp. 100–109).

It is encouraging that Algeria is tackling violence against women as a matter of public health, within a multi-agency approach. This suggests that the problem is not seen merely as an individual idiosyncrasy, or a ‘private’ matter, confined to the family, but recognised as a more systemic phenomenon, which demands a societal response, an assumption of responsibility by the highest agencies in the country. The Algerian government says that it is considering a broad action plan, including rehabilitation measures for violent men.
Women's transnational political action

I have shown how violence has been used to discipline women, to contest their access to public space, and to challenge or subvert their determination to speak and act for themselves. This concluding section will bring together some of the examples already discussed to illustrate how their capacity for effective action has developed and show how Algerian women’s resistance to violence has an important transnational dimension.

We have seen how Algerian women were implicated in resistance to colonialism from the outset, how they experienced brute physical and symbolic violence at the hands of the colonisers who dishonoured them, treated them as beasts of burden or identified them as constituting the real resistance to colonial rule through their influence in the domestic sphere. It was in this sphere that stories, songs and practices where maintained, all constituting daily acts of resistance to colonial domination. Women’s well-documented role as mobilised moudjahidates in the war of liberation illustrates their readiness and capacity for action. At independence in 1962, the equality of women was not a priority, instead the government set up an institution, the UNFA, which they hoped would defuse and channel their demands. While the UNFA did mobilise against the Family Code in the 1980s, other independent groups of women began to form at this time, and the struggle against this legislation has been a continuous theme to the present day. I discuss these organisations more extensively elsewhere but it is interesting to note that in their titles and in their literature they honour both the women who resisted the violence of colonialism and the moudjahidates (Lloyd, 1999a,b, 2005a).

In the 1980s as the growing Islamist movement attempted to clamp down on women’s behaviour: ‘the most banal act becomes combat: continuing to go to the beach in a bathing suit or walking down the street in a sleeveless blouse... are victories stolen from the enemy’ (Berrah, Bachy, Ben Salaa, & Boughedir, 1981, p. 252). Widespread violence gave rise to the breaking of social norms: women attended – and in some instances, even led – funerals which often became political (in the widest sense) demonstrations of defiance and foci of resistance (Cherifati-Merabtine, 1998). These experiences were expressed in an outpouring of women’s writing about their experiences of violence, their fears and the ways in which they confronted them (Bonn, 1999; Chaulet-Achour, 1998; Stora, 2001). Initially this production was confined to well-known writers who had already been published in France. In more recent years literary reviews, such as Algérie Littérature Action and Etoiles d’Encre have appeared, published in Algeria and distributed in France. So from a sense of abandonment and isolation came creative works, everyday resistance and a challenge to earlier norms.

Throughout the 1990s support came from Algerian migrants, especially in France – through regular family remittances of various kinds (Lloyd, 2005b), and relief for the many asylum seekers (whose numbers had increased in France from 101 in 1989 to 1099 in 1993) (Lloyd, 2003, p. 324). Organisations were specifically set up for the reception and support of exiles through the close cooperation of migrants’ organisations and solidarity groups.

As violence against women became both political and absolute in the 1990s (Chaulet, 2000) women’s resistance began to extend beyond Algeria’s national boundaries. Maghreb Egalité95 was formed comprising Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian women’s groups to represent Maghrebi women at the Beijing Conference in 1995. They made violence against women a priority and cooperated in this with organisations such as Women against Fundamentalisms and Women living under Muslim laws (Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité, 1998, 1999; Helie-Lucas, 1993). In establishing resources for women who had experienced violence, they began to liaise with international funding agencies, building their capacity for effective action. This work has generated solidarity and funding, most recently for equipment and premises. Here, Algerian women’s regular contacts in the diaspora provide useful resources: for example many Algerian women’s organisations continue to use France as a base for their activities for example confiding their funds to bank accounts in France managed by trusted colleagues who regularly send them small sums of money.9

At the political (national and regional level) the work of NGOs and mechanisms to enforce international conventions pressured the Algerian government to take seriously the problem of violence against women. One outcome of this was a seminar organised in October 2000 by the Centre d’Ecoute Juridique et Psychologique of SOS Femmes en Détresse in Algiers on violence against women and children which set up a network which has published its own report on violence (Reseau Wassila, 2002). These actions were significant in that they acknowledged the problem and recognised a role for specific legislation to protect women from violence. This would be backed up by data from bodies such as the police, social services, the courts and other state bodies that serve as points of contact for victims of family violence. This approach has been developed
through an Algerian presence at international conferences on violence. Links were forged between women in the associative movement and groups of professional women, including those in the diaspora.

Given the salience of these issues at the present time, the experience of Algerian women’s organizations in struggling around the issues of violence backed by repressive personal status legislation is a valuable resource. One of the strengths of their attempts to organise is the way in which networks are supported by international mobilisations, and this is increasingly transnational in its form.

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Endnotes

1 All translations from the French are my own unless otherwise noted.
2 There is no scope here to do justice to this subject, but see Amrane (1991).
3 The articles cited are from the most recent constitution of 28th November 1996.
5 This is not to deny that other people, especially public sector workers and intellectuals, were targets.
8 El Watan 5 janvier 2005.
9 Interview with Ourida Choukari September 2004, Algiers.

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