

# **Mothers Raising Movements. The Struggle of Moroccan Families for the New Left Political Prisoners and the Victims of Enforced Disappearance (1972–2005)**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the movement formed by the relatives of the Moroccan New Left's political prisoners. The Movement of the political prisoners' families (MPPF) was characterised by the almost-exclusive participation of political prisoners' mothers, wives, and sisters who defied social norms by protesting, occupying public spaces, and demanding truth and justice for the victims of political repression during the Years of Lead (1965–1995). It documents the MPPF's evolution from its inception in 1972 until the majority of New Left political prisoners were granted amnesty in 1992. It also covers the period of 1992–2005 when the unresolved issue of enforced disappearance's victims led to the establishment of their associations of the MPPF. This article analyses the articulation of female leadership and the convergences between different generations, arguing that the MPPF constituted an unprecedented intergenerational phenomenon. It devotes specific focus to the role of the mothers – either from subaltern and underprivileged social contexts, and from already politicised backgrounds – and their transformative participation within the MPPF. Ultimately, it underscored that, due to their activism and testimonies, the mothers of political prisoners have emerged as significant symbols of civic resistance in most recent times.

*Key words: Morocco; Movement of political prisoners' families; mothers; enforced disappearance; New Left*

## 1. Introduction. Women's subalternity and political repression during the Years of Lead

Over the last decades, the notion of 'subalternity' has been profitably employed to address the history of workers, peasants, slaves, linguistic minorities, and immigrant communities, as well as women in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1980s, social historians have focused on various forms of female subalternities that exist within the private and public spheres, bringing attention to issues such as women's enslavement, familial segregation, and labour exploitation.<sup>2</sup> The examination of women's history in the region, however, has primarily focused on the nation-building endeavours of the political elites during the transition from colonial rule to independence.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the 2010–2011 Arab upheavals catalysed a new wave of historical inquiry that sought to reconstruct the history from 'below' of minor actors, revolutionary subjects, and protesting masses.<sup>4</sup> In light of this, the examination of social unrest and movements from a historical perspective can offer valuable insights into the renewed comprehension of women's challenge to subalternity. This article addresses the topic in modern Morocco by unveiling the pioneering alliance within the Movement of political prisoners' families (MPPF) among politically experienced women and less educated, lower-class women with no prior political background.

The phenomenon of political prisoners grew to significant proportions during the so-called Years of Lead, a forty-year period in Moroccan recent history (1965–1995) marked by the harsh repression of militaries who tried to overthrow the regime, Saharawi and Islamist protesters, and, on a larger scale, radical leftist groups.<sup>5</sup> Since the mid-1960s, the New Left comprised intellectuals and students with a Marxist–Leninist orientation who opposed monarchical rule through street demonstrations as well as clandestine activities. The New Left was fuelled by members pushed off Left parties such as the Parti de la libération et du socialisme (PLS) and the Union national des forces populaires (UNFP) who formed the Marxist–Leninist organisations *Ilā al-amām*, 23 Mārs and *Li-naḥdum ša'b* as well as a culturally vibrant avant-garde centred around the bilingual review *Anfās: majalla fikriyya 'arabiyya maġribiyya/Souffles: Revue culturelle arabe du Maghreb*.<sup>6</sup>

Since the early 1970s, the severe repression of the New Left's revolutionary forces resulted in thousands of arbitrary detentions. Moreover, the Tanzim group, led from abroad by UNFP political leader Mohammed Fqih Basri, sought to destabilise the regime with a plot by attacking military

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<sup>1</sup> Cole 2018: 81-96; Moreau - Schaar, 2016; Cronin 2008; Chalcraft 2006: 9-38; Beinin 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Loualich 2008: 200-209; Meriwether - Tucker, 1999; Tucker 1985; Hammam 1981.

<sup>3</sup> For the North Africa, see for instance: Kallander 2021; Vince 2005; Al-Ali 2000; Badran 1995; Marzouki 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Bayat 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Vermeren 2016: 45-68.

<sup>6</sup> Chaoui 1992; Majid 1987a; Bouaziz 1981.

outposts in Moulay Bouazza's Rif district in March 1973. In response, a massive campaign of arrests and reprisals against the local population was conducted in the area.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the decade, the Marxist–Leninist movement collapsed, and Morocco became a prison-state with hundreds of militants subjected to enforced disappearances and sentenced to long-term detentions or death. In the first half of the 1980s, the implementation of neoliberal policies led to a significant increase in prices of basic commodities, which in turn caused social unrest in many cities, including Casablanca and Marrakesh. As a result, a new generation of demonstrators faced waves of repression.<sup>8</sup>

Amid the repression of the 1970s and 1980s, women gathered outside of penitentiaries to provide support for their imprisoned family members. The MPPF arose as an unparalleled intergenerational phenomenon composed prevalently of mothers, wives and sisters who, in defence of political prisoners' rights, challenged social conventions by means of protest and awareness-raising initiatives in public spaces. Unlike similar experiences in South America that drew the world's attention, such as those involving the Association of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the Arpilleristas as well as the Agrupación de familiares de detenidos desaparecidos (AFDD) – which sought to uncover the truth about the *desaparecidos* during the military dictatorships respectively in Argentina (1977–1983) and in Pinochet's Chile (1973–1990) –<sup>9</sup> in the Middle East and North Africa, family activism in support of political prisoners has yet to be systematically addressed.<sup>10</sup>

The phenomenon of family activism in support of Moroccan political prisoners has received little attention. The few contributions currently available focus on the role of wives<sup>11</sup> and address the issue of mothers' engagement based on testimonies produced during the Moroccan transitional justice phase (2004–2005).<sup>12</sup> Drawing on testimonies, recently published memoirs, personal interviews with sons of deceased mothers, archival and press documentation, this article offers an analysis of the MPPF's composition, chronicles its activities, and explores its significance in the development of Moroccan civil society. Furthermore, it delves deeper into the concept of motherhood in relation to political detention and enforced disappearance. By paying special attention to the role of elderly women, this article questions the assumption that mothers were submissive and gregarious presences in the MPPF. Ultimately, it argues that dialectics, solidarity and unity among diverse generations of women were key to the MPPF's success in securing the release of the majority of New Left political prisoners.

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<sup>7</sup> Boudarka 2020; Bennouna 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Daoud 2007: 248–249, 272–273.

<sup>9</sup> Adams 2014; García 2002; Guzman Bouvard 2002.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Giacaman and Johnson's (2013: 54–80) analysis of the effects of prolonged imprisonment on Palestinian prisoners' wives and mothers.

<sup>11</sup> Hivert, 2021: 79–94; González Riera 2016: 51–66.

<sup>12</sup> Belkiz, 2023: 1–13.

Nevertheless, this contribution does not purport to be an exhaustive examination of the phenomenon of women's mobilisation against political imprisonment. It focuses on the MPPF's major activities, which took place in urban centres in which the New Left members were detained, namely Casablanca, Kenitra, Marrakesh, Meknes, and Rabat. Thus, it does not include cases of families of the military officers involved in two failed coups against Hassan II in the early 1970s, who were held for nearly two decades in inhumane conditions in the remote and secret detention site known as Tazmamart, located in the Meknes-Tafilalet region.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the article does not consider the actions of families of Islamist political prisoners, most of whom have been persecuted since the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> Historiography is still required to restore these pathways of civic resistance, as well as the experiences of political prisoners' female relatives who were subjected to state violence in rural milieux merely for being family members of political opponents.<sup>15</sup>

## **2. The MPPF: a convergence of women across generations**

The MPPF originated in the early 1970s, when the first waves of arrest targeted the New Left. In the initial stages, the political detainees were subjected to forced disappearance for several months, causing their family members to engage in desperate and isolated efforts to find them in police stations, jails, and hospitals. After months – sometimes years – of complete disappearance, political detainees were relocated from secret torture sites to civil prisons, such as Kenitra Central Prison, Boulamharez in Marrakesh, Sidi Said in Meknes, Ain Borja, Ghbila and Oukacha in Casablanca, and El Alou in Rabat. Consequently, women began assembling spontaneously at prisons' gates.<sup>16</sup>

Laila Majdouli had just married in June 1972 when her husband, Kamal Lahbib, faced arrest in Béni-Mellal. Both were high school teachers and gravitated towards the Li-nakhdim al-sha'b branch of the Marxist–Leninist movement.<sup>17</sup> After her husband was transferred to Casablanca, Majdouli moved into the city, eventually finding him at Ghbila Prison. Since then, she has embarked on a journey shared with other women of « violence verbale, psychologique et institutionnelle ».<sup>18</sup> As she remembered:

« La première visite fut une occasion pour faire la connaissance de certaines familles dans

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<sup>13</sup> Menin 2019: 307-332; Hachad 2018: 208-224.

<sup>14</sup> Slyomovics 2005: 160-194.

<sup>15</sup> Guessous 2007: 39-60.

<sup>16</sup> Saoudi 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Majdouli 2020: 32.

<sup>18</sup> Id. 19, 26-27.

la première cour de la prison. Il fallait attendre que les autres arrivent, pour que toutes les familles se rassemblent dans ce même lieu avant d'aller au parloir. Une femme soulevait la tête et pleurait. C'était la mère de Mohamed Belmejdoub, l'un des étudiants qui étaient avec moi à la Faculté des Lettres (...). Le juge d'instruction lui avait refusé l'autorisation de voir son fils, sans explication aucune. Je l'ai calmée et rassurée en lui promettant d'essayer d'avoir des nouvelles de son fils par le biais des autres ».<sup>19</sup>

Prior to visiting the prisoners, the family members had to get permission from the investigating judge, and this request was not always granted. At this early stage, the arbitrariness of the prison authorities' decisions and the intimidating conduct of the guards induced a collective sense of helplessness and distress among the family members. Nevertheless, the dire prison conditions of the political prisoners, as well as the limited duration of the visits, led to spontaneous demonstrations in front of the prisons.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, women throughout the country flocked to Casablanca, where dozens of New Left political prisoners were being held.<sup>21</sup> For example, Halima Zayn al-Abidin, whose husband was detained in Ain Borja Prison in Casablanca, came from Marrakesh. As she remembered, families formed strong connections, and those residing in Casablanca, such as the Miftah family,<sup>22</sup> often welcomed relatives of political prisoners from faraway regions into their homes.<sup>23</sup> Aiming to reduce disparities between them and collectively improve the conditions of political prisoners, they also established a solidarity fund to provide support to families in need, cover travel costs, and replenish baskets of fresh food for those in prison.<sup>24</sup>

At that time, as Jocelyne Laabi, a French woman recalled, the MPPF was « un concept nouveau en train d'émerger ».<sup>25</sup> Laabi relocated to Meknes with her family at the age of six. She married Abdellatif Laabi, a poet and prominent intellectual who was the creator of *Souffles/Anfās* review and a member of Ilā al-amām group. After his arrest on January 27, 1972,<sup>26</sup> Jocelyne Laabi travelled from Rabat to Casablanca on a weekly basis to visit him at Ghibla Prison. She encountered other women in the same situation such as Khadija Menebhi. She was Abdelaziz's and Saida's sister: both exponents of Ilā al-amām, Abdelaziz was also president of the Union national des étudiants du Maroc (UNEM). Besides, Menebhi was the wife of Abdelaziz Loudiy, who was active in 23 Mārs

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<sup>19</sup> Id. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Zayn al-Abidin n.d., 1.

<sup>21</sup> Majdouli 2020: 29.

<sup>22</sup> Mostapha Miftah was a Marxist–Leninist militant sentenced to 10 years in prison at the 1977 Casablanca trial.

<sup>23</sup> Zayn al-Abidin n.d., 1.

<sup>24</sup> Majdouli 2020: 30.

<sup>25</sup> Laabi 2005: 148.

<sup>26</sup> N.n. 1973: 14.

group. Lucile Daumas, a French woman and wife of Ilā al-amām member Driss Bouissef Rebab, was also present.<sup>27</sup> The MPPF in Casablanca began to expand when mothers and wives from Ain Borja and Ghbila Prison joined the force.<sup>28</sup>

The MPPF had a clear female predominance.<sup>29</sup> In reality, as Leila Chafai, partner of Ilā al-amām member Abdelkader Chaoui, pointed out, men were also present, albeit in small numbers.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, some men attended meetings with their wives, but gradually stopped. Thus, the MPPF became an overwhelmingly female phenomenon.<sup>31</sup> According to Halima Zayn al-Abidin, men were dissuaded from participating because they were met with great violence by the police in comparison to women, mothers in particular.<sup>32</sup>

Significantly, the generational gap did not prevent older mothers from joining forces with young wives (and sisters) to mobilise in favour of their children. As Leila Chafai stated:

« Le Mouvement des familles de prisonniers politiques a été marqué par une complexité qui a fait sa force. Si les épouses et compagnes des prisonniers politiques ont conduit les actions du mouvement, orientant et sensibilisant les militants les plus âgés, ces derniers, de leur côté, ont soutenu les militants les plus jeunes en les protégeant et en participant aux activités ».<sup>33</sup>

At the beginning, the initiatives of the MPPF were indeed led by the younger wives and took advantage of the fact that elderly women and mothers were targeted less for violence by police,<sup>34</sup> at least in public spaces.<sup>35</sup> As in the cases of Leila Majdouli, Khadija Menebhi, and Jocelyne Laabi, younger wives were already politicised, themselves being involved in New Left groups. However, since its inception, the MPPF was characterised by inclusiveness and a complementarity of parts, having as its primary objectives the improvement of political prisoners' conditions and the recognition of their rights. Women sought to guarantee that political prisoners had access to food and medical care, in addition to regular visits with the families. One of their initial requests made to the investigating judge in Casablanca was indeed for an additional weekly visit, which was then

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<sup>27</sup> Laabi, 2005: 234.

<sup>28</sup> Zayn al-Abidin n.d., 1.

<sup>29</sup> Laabi, 2005: 186-187.

<sup>30</sup> Chafai 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Menebhi 2000: 9-10.

<sup>32</sup> Zayn al-Abidin n.d., 1.

<sup>33</sup> Chafai 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Semlali 2024.

<sup>35</sup> N.n. 1980b, 22.

approved.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, they demanded the release of their relatives or the holding of fair trials as they were being arbitrarily detained.

The MPPF organised awareness campaigns, sit-ins, protests, and hunger strikes.<sup>37</sup> In particular, the campaign initiated in 1972 in conjunction with the hunger strike of the New Left political prisoners can be regarded as an inaugural political act. Political prisoners in Ghbila Prison engaged in a hunger strike from November 28 to December 30, demanding fair trials or releases. Women disseminated information about the hunger strike, contacted the press, issued press releases, and collected signatures to request an immediate intervention from the authorities.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, several women confronted the General Director of Prisons in Rabat, without, however, obtaining improvements.<sup>39</sup>

The ongoing impasse emboldened a larger group of women to confront the General Director of Prisons as well as to organise a sit-in at the Ministry of Justice.<sup>40</sup> In the sit-in, which mirrored the MPPF's composition (« D'où viennent ces hordes des femmes à l'air décidé, ces jeunes habillées à l'Européenne et ces vieilles en jellaba et litham ? »<sup>41</sup>), the Minister of Justice Abbas Traaji was held captive by approximately fifty women (« Il ne pouvait pas sortir, il était assiégé. Il était devenu notre 'prisonnier' »<sup>42</sup>) until he was compelled to receive them.<sup>43</sup> A significant number of political detainees were hospitalised when the hunger strike concluded on December 30, 1972, and groundbreaking improvements in the conditions of political prisoners were achieved. Prisoners were allowed to read books, see their children during visits, receive medical treatment and eat better food. They also received information on the trial.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, the MPPF's members were subjected to increased interrogations, searches, and arrests. Leila Majdouli was briefly detained as a preventive measure in March 1973. In response to this intimidatory action, the other women undertook a two-day hunger strike.<sup>45</sup> The trial eventually inaugurated, concluded three months later, on September 3, 1973, with a series of prison sentences: five years (Kamal Lahbib, Laila Majdouli's husband), ten years (Abdellatif Laabi, Jocelyne Laabi's husband), fifteen years (Abdelaziz Loudiyi, Khadija Menebhi's husband) and life imprisonment (Abdelaziz Menebhi, in absentia).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Laabi, 2005: 149.

<sup>37</sup> N.n. 1980a: 3.

<sup>38</sup> Majdouli 2020: 34.

<sup>39</sup> Id. 35.

<sup>40</sup> Id. 37.

<sup>41</sup> Laabi, 2005: 157

<sup>42</sup> Majdouli 2020: 38.

<sup>43</sup> Laabi, 2005: 158-159.

<sup>44</sup> Majdouli 2020: 42

<sup>45</sup> Id. 48-56.

<sup>46</sup> n.n. 1978a: 42. On the 1973 political trial, see also: Gourdon 1973: 393-409.

After the trial, political detainees from Casablanca were transferred to Kenitra Central Prison. This required families to take a new route to Kenitra and reorganise.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the rights acquired by prisoners in Casablanca were not granted in Kenitra and required new negotiations. Families in Kenitra encountered new limitations regarding the potential for political prisoners to receive material from home, as well as the number and duration of visits.<sup>48</sup> Women's visits to their relatives were indeed instrumental in the coordination of what remained of the Marxist–Leninist movement, which comprised small groups that were not always able to communicate in prison. During the visits, women exchanged information on the ways to continue the class struggle and coordinated the hunger strikes among different prison areas and even jails.<sup>49</sup>

During the latter half of the 1970s, in Kenitra Central Prison, divergencies among the Marxist–Leninist groups regarding the methods of pursuing the political struggle increased. 23 Mārs expressed a desire to engage in representational politics, and Ilā al-amām remained committed to using violence if necessary, expelling members who advocated embracing reform.<sup>50</sup> However, political prisoners' disagreements did not have a significant impact on the cohesion of the MPPF.<sup>51</sup> Rather, subsequent rounds of arrests, which led to involvement in the MPPF of other families since 1976, resulted in its substantial growth and some readjustments. The MPPF was then able to enhance protest strategies, and its coordination of hunger strikes in conjunction with trials.<sup>52</sup>

In January 1977 trial, 139 Marxist–Leninist militants were brought to court in Casablanca. During the trial, women organised a demonstration led by mothers at the forefront, which was immediately surrounded by the police.<sup>53</sup> Women in the courtroom loudly protested accusations of crimes against national security, the penalty for which was again five years to life in prison.<sup>54</sup> In November 1977, when political prisoners initiated a large-scale hunger strike, the MPPF reached a significant turning point.<sup>55</sup> On December 10, International Human Rights Day, women took over the al-Sunna Mosque in Rabat, chanting prayers and conducting a 24-hour hunger strike.<sup>56</sup> They organised independently of the political prisoners, who had not been allowed to communicate with outside contacts.<sup>57</sup> In the following months, women coordinated additional sit-ins, attempted to

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<sup>47</sup> Majdouli 2020: 82–84.

<sup>48</sup> Laabi 2005: 186.

<sup>49</sup> Saoudi 2024; Semlali 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Bouissef Rekab 1989:169–189.

<sup>51</sup> Miftah 2013: 66; Menebhi 2000: 49.

<sup>52</sup> Laabi 2005: 230–232; Majid 1987b: 183–184. Behind the pseudonym of Majdi Majid was the writer and militant of Ilā al-amām Abdelkader Chaoui.

<sup>53</sup> Zayn al-Abidin n.d., 3.

<sup>54</sup> N.n. 1980: 22.

<sup>55</sup> n.n. 1978a: 50–53.

<sup>56</sup> N.n., 1977 n.p.

<sup>57</sup> González Riera 2014.



confront political authorities, and distributed multiple news releases.<sup>58</sup> In February 1978, an appeal was sent to the president of the UN Commission of Human Rights as well as to the national progressist and international humanitarian forces, denouncing the poor conditions that caused the death of Ilā al-amām member Saida Menebhi, militant detainee and sister of Khadija Menebhi, on December 11, 1977.<sup>59</sup>

The MPPF also carried out awareness campaigns at the university. A number of initiatives to support the New Left political prisoners were hosted in the Faculties of Science and Arts and Humanities at the University of Rabat, where the “Week of the Political Prisoner” was held in 1978,<sup>60</sup> at the Hassan II Institute of Agronomy and Veterinary Medicine Faculty of the same city, and at the Mohammedia School of Engineers.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, the MPPF supported an unrestricted hunger strike at Kenitra Central Prison in November of that year, which peaked at 48 days.<sup>62</sup>

On December 10, 1979, the MPPF achieved another significant milestone when activists initiated a 24-hour hunger strike while occupying the United Nations offices in Rabat. This meticulously organised action garnered the attention of radio stations and newspapers,<sup>63</sup> and resulted in the arrest of several protesters, including elderly mothers.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, despite the advice of certain political prisoners, the MPPF joined the demonstration for the International Workers’ Day on May 1, 1980, together with the Confédération démocratique du travail (CDT), under the banner “‘Ā’ilāt al-sujanā’ al-sīyāsiyyin” (Families of political prisoners).<sup>65</sup> This action signalled the MPPF’s greater autonomy regarding directives coming from the prisons on the practices of struggle (Fig. 1).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> N.n. 1980: 22.

<sup>59</sup> Association de soutien aux Comités de lutte contre la répression au Maroc 1978c: n.p.

<sup>60</sup> Laabi 2005: 233.

<sup>61</sup> Zayn al-Abidin n.d., 2.

<sup>62</sup> Saoudi 2005a: 46.

<sup>63</sup> Laabi 2005: 249.

<sup>64</sup> Zayn al-Abidin 2006: 63.

<sup>65</sup> Rollinde 2003: 217.

<sup>66</sup> Laabi 2005: 234-237.



Fig. 1. May 1, 1980, International Workers' Day. The CDT's demonstration in Casablanca was joined by the families of political prisoners. *Libertés Maroc*, n. 1, June 15, 1980.

Since the late 1970s, families started to issue collective press releases where they identified themselves with the cities in which they were active, for instance « Les familles des détenus politiques des prisons de Kénitra, Chaouen, Settat, Meknes, Casablanca », <sup>67</sup> leaving behind signatures as families of political prisoners belonging to « Groupe Serfaty » or « Groupe Balafrej ». <sup>68</sup> This shift reinforced the MPPF's degree of autonomy from the Marxist–Leninist leaders and it mirrored its expanding network and capacity to coordinate across cities.

During the latter half of the 1970s and early 1980s, the MPPF experienced a significant turnover. Laila Majdouli and Jocelyne Laabi, whose husbands had been respectively sentenced to brief prison terms and granted amnesty, left the MPPF. Nevertheless, they maintained ties to it, like many others <sup>69</sup> while several former members continued to visit the militants in prison. <sup>70</sup> Moreover, the MPPF's activities greatly impacted the detention conditions of political prisoners in Kenitra, who could now complete academic degrees, enrol in doctoral programs <sup>71</sup> and spend more time with their families during visits. <sup>72</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, the MPPF attempted to internationalize the issue of Moroccan political prisoners. On August 19, 1985, a large group of mothers held a sit-in in Rabat to draw international attention to their situation during Pope John Paul II's apostolic visit to Morocco. International news

<sup>67</sup> N.N. 1978b: 4. To disperse political prisoners under hunger strikes and weaken their families' actions, political prisoners were often re-distributed to other prisons, including Chefchaouen and Settat. N.n. 1980b.

<sup>68</sup> Abraham Serfaty and Anis Balafrej were respectively the founders of the Marxist–Leninist groups *Ilā al-amām* and *Li-naḥdum ša'b*.

<sup>69</sup> Majdouli 2020: 92; Laabi 2005: 248.

<sup>70</sup> Saoudi 2024.

<sup>71</sup> Barrada 2009: 26.

<sup>72</sup> Bouissef Rekab 2024: 148.

agencies received the sit-in press release, but the organisers were arrested before the event. Leila Chafai evaded detection for a few weeks, taking refuge in Tétouan.<sup>73</sup> Upon returning to Rabat, she was imprisoned and tortured, and her passport was confiscated. It was indeed not uncommon for young women linked to the New Left and active in the MPPF to face the same violence as militants in prison. Chafai's denunciation of these events was published a few days later in *Maroc répression*, a bulletin published in Paris by the Association de soutien aux comités de lutte contre la répression au Maroc, that frequently reprinted testimonies of political prisoners and their families.<sup>74</sup>

### 3. Mothers in the forefront

The Kenitra Central Prison, which housed the largest concentration of New Left militants, catalysed the mothers of political prisoners from Tangier to Marrakesh to Beni-Mellal to Meknes, the majority of whom were illiterate and politically inexperienced.<sup>75</sup> Women frequently discovered their children's political involvement after their abrupt absence, leaving them stunned and ashamed. According to Jocelyne Laabi: « Le premier combat à mener fut contre elles-mêmes. Voir son fils en prison représentait pour certaines une honte irrémédiable. (...) Alors on acquérait ce respect nouveau de soi-même, su combat de son fils (...) il fallait convaincre de la nécessité de briser le silence, d'oser parler, d'oser revendiquer et lutter ». <sup>76</sup>

At the time their children went missing, some mothers were not allowed to leave their marital homes and had to challenge patriarchal conventions to exit their households.<sup>77</sup> Initially, mothers mobilised independently, unaware that torture was taking place in secret detention centres. The burden of not knowing about their children also caused serious family crises, including suicide attempts. Zineb Kadmiri was an illiterate spinner who worked at home in Casablanca and mother of Nouredine Saoudi, a 23 Mārs militant and *Souffles/Anfās* review contributor arbitrarily arrested in December 1974.<sup>78</sup> Profiteers deceived her by providing false information about her son's location in exchange for money, leading her to attempt suicide.<sup>79</sup>

Subsequently, Kadmiri found solace and solidarity in the MPPF.<sup>80</sup> She participated in the occupations of al-Sunna Mosque in 1977 and the UN headquarters in Rabat in 1979, as well as in

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<sup>73</sup> Chafai 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Chafai 1987: 3.

<sup>75</sup> Miftah 2005: 69-70.

<sup>76</sup> Laabi 2005: 148-149.

<sup>77</sup> Saoudi 2005b: 9; Menebhi 2000: 118.

<sup>78</sup> Saoudi 2015: 205. Nouredine Saoudi received a 20-years sentence in the 1977 Casablanca trial.

<sup>79</sup> Saoudi 2005a: 31-47.

<sup>80</sup> Saoudi 2024.

other sit-ins and confrontations with the authorities. It is noteworthy that Kadmiri and other mothers have been conducting seminars at the University of Rabat, lecturing young students on the importance of advocating for the rights of political prisoners.<sup>81</sup> In November 1978, Habiba Tazi, illiterate mother of Jaouad Mdidech, a Marxist–Leninist militant who was imprisoned in 1975 and sentenced to 20 years in the Casablanca trial in 1977, was among the women who participated in the 48-day hunger strike, which she ended solely due to her husband’s persuasion. After that, she joined other mothers in signing a letter that was sent to the king, demanding amnesty for political prisoners, a request that in case of her son eventually materialised in the early 1980s.<sup>82</sup>

In the MPPF, elderly mothers and spouses from rural backgrounds experienced an unparalleled level of mobility in urban environments. Their weekly trips to prisons and commitment not only facilitated the growth of MPPF networks of female solidarity but also offered them a previously unknown freedom. Reversing the subalternity in which they were subjected, these women became interlocutors with prison and judicial administrators, the press, and recognisable actors in the public sphere along with other women of different generations.<sup>83</sup>

A clear example of intergenerational mutual help is the case of the women close to political prisoner Driss Bouissef-Rekab. His mother, nicknamed ‘Paquita’, was always accompanied by her daughter-in-law, Lucile Daumas, when she searched for Driss in Casablanca and Rabat and later, when she participated in the MPPF in Kenitra. Paquita was a Spanish woman who moved with her family as a child to Tétouan during the Spanish protectorate.<sup>84</sup> Unconventionally, she married a Muslim man with whom she had six children.<sup>85</sup> Her son Driss studied in Toulouse, France, where he met Lucile in the radical Left entourage. When he returned to work as a university assistant at the Faculty of Lettres in Rabat, he brought his new French wife with him.<sup>86</sup> After his arrest in January 1976 due to his involvement in *Ilā al-amām*, Lucile lived with and took care of Paquita and while contributing to the MPPF’s development.<sup>87</sup>

Throughout the years, mothers took on significant roles in the MPPF. In the early 1980s, when Leila Chafai visited Kenitra Central Prison to meet with political prisoners as part of her activism in *Haraka qā‘dī* (Basic movement), which comprised a new generation of militants who sought to continue Marxist–Leninist commitment, she met Fatima Ait Ettajer, known as ‘Oummi’ (‘Mother’)

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<sup>81</sup> Saoudi, 2005a: 46; Zayn al-Abidin n.d., 2.

<sup>82</sup> Guessous 2005: 116.

<sup>83</sup> Miftah 2005: 56-59.

<sup>84</sup> Bouissef Rekab 2024: 34

<sup>85</sup> Id. 34-67.

<sup>86</sup> Id. 135-142.

<sup>87</sup> Id. 152-157.

Fatma, who brought Chafai to the visitors' room of the prison.<sup>88</sup> As the prison became a central location for New Left prisoners and for women coming from all over the country to visit their relatives, meetings that originally took place at the prison gates transitioned to Oummi Fatma's home.<sup>89</sup> Her place, also opened to host women coming from far away, served as the venue for the MPPS's gatherings in which decisions regarding its actions were made and news releases and public statements were drafted.<sup>90</sup>

An Amazigh woman, Oummi Fatma was born in a village in the Souss-Massa region in 1930. She married and moved to Kenitra with her husband, who was active in the trade sector. She received a basic education just after her marriage, which lasted until her husband's sudden death in 1965. Navigating through financial difficulties, she was able to continue the family trade and raised seven children by herself, providing schooling for all of them. After her son, Hassan Semlali, was arrested in November 1974 because of his political involvement with 23 Mārs,<sup>91</sup> she did not know about his whereabouts for fifteen months, during which time he was detained at Derb Moulay Cherif, a secret torture site in Casablanca.

Oummi Fatma was essential to the MPPF's coordination and unity. Well known for her good nature and credibility, bolstered by her respected status as a widow, she was « assoiffée de connaissance et de politique ».<sup>92</sup> She brought together the younger women, with whom she had excellent relationships, and the older women like herself, providing them with moral and material support.<sup>93</sup> When interviewed by the feminist review *8 Mārs* in July 1984, she highlighted the suffering and bravery of the mothers who were arrested multiple times despite their advanced age.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to the mothers who developed a newfound sense of empowerment inside the MPPF, there were women who already had a politically active history deeply connected to the anticolonial struggle. Touria Sekkat, born in Fez in 1935, was a member of a family active in the Istiqlal ('Independence') party. In the framework of her nationalist and anti-colonial commitment, she played an important role in establishing literacy programs in the city of Salé and providing support to political prisoners engaged in the fight. As a result of her activities, she was incarcerated in both Rabat and Salé.<sup>95</sup>

After independence, her family's political commitment in opposition to the postcolonial

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<sup>88</sup> Chafai 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Semlali 2024

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Semlali, 2024. Hassan Semlali was a member of the National Secretariat and of the Bureau Politique of 23 Mārs. He was also responsible of the organisation for the Kenitra region.

<sup>92</sup> Menebhi 2000: 120.

<sup>93</sup> Semlali 2024.

<sup>94</sup> Alaoui 1984: 7.

<sup>95</sup> Akharbach - Rerhayé 1992: 27-29.

regime resulted in multiple incarcerations. Following the Moulay Bouazza plot in March 1973, the police arbitrarily kidnapped her husband Mohamed El Oudie, one of the UNFP's founders, and released him from prison in January 1974.<sup>96</sup> Salah and Aziz, Sekkat's sons, faced detention in 1973 and 1974 due to their involvement in 23 Mārs. Touria Sekkat adhered to the MPPF, assuming a prominent role within it. She displayed proactive behaviour by directly confronting the authorities and participating in protests, including the occupation of the al-Sunna Mosque in Rabat.<sup>97</sup> Besides, she participated in the 1975 split from the UNFP that resulted in the establishment of the Union socialiste des forces populaires (USFP) and played a key role in establishing the USFP women's section.

After several months in Derb Moulay Cherif, Salah and Aziz El Oudie were transferred to Kenitra Central Prison, where Touria regularly travelled in company of Saoudi's mother Zeinab Kadmiri.<sup>98</sup> In an effort to destabilise the political prisoners' unity, authorities repeatedly moved her sons to different prisons during hunger strikes and hospitalised them as a result of their extended fasts.<sup>99</sup> Touria Sekkat was present at the Averroes hospital in Casablanca in December 1977 when political prisoner Saida Menebhi passed away as a consequence of the November–December hunger strike. Following this event, which resulted in significant improvements in the conditions of the prisoners, Touria Sekkat organised a protest in front of Kenitra Central Prison and was briefly arrested along with her daughter Assia. Assia El Oudie was one of the first women judges in Morocco and she resigned as a magistrate at the Casablanca Court due to her participation in the MPPF's activities.<sup>100</sup>

Like Touria Sekkat, Fatima Azair was among the women active in the MPPF with previous experience in the anticolonial struggle and the post-independence Left parties. Born in Chefchaouen in 1930, she joined the armed struggle against the Spanish rule at a young age, conveying and hiding weapons and messages in the Tetuan area while facing arrest and torture.<sup>101</sup> Following the independence, she actively participated in the UNFP and subsequently, from its establishment in 1975, in the USFP. In the 1970s, Fatima Azair and Touria Sekkat were outliers within the USFP, which was uninterested in supporting the Marxist–Leninist political prisoners' cause. Azair's autonomous behaviour concerning the political prisoners' cause led to conflicts within the party, which she left at the end of the 1970s.<sup>102</sup>

After rejecting a combined marriage, Fatima Azair had never married or had children of her

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<sup>96</sup> Sekkat 2005: 96.

<sup>97</sup> Sekkat 2005: 100.

<sup>98</sup> Saoudi 2024.

<sup>99</sup> Sekkat 2005: 101.

<sup>100</sup> Sekkat 2005: 99.

<sup>101</sup> Benharar, 2024a; Razi 2024.

<sup>102</sup> Benharar 2024b.

own. However, she was known as “(Oum)Mi Fama,” as she considered all political prisoners to be her children.<sup>103</sup> Mi Fama began her involvement with the MPPF in 1973, when waves of arrest followed the Moulay Bouazza plot. She participated in hunger strikes, sit-ins, and the occupation of the al-Sunna Mosque.<sup>104</sup> During her visits in prison, she gave priority to political prisoners who did not get any visitors.<sup>105</sup> She also used her connections to help families in financial distress and reinforced the MPPF’s intergenerational bond.<sup>106</sup>

Over the 1980s, the repression targeted a new generation of demonstrators. After taking part in the Marrakesh uprisings in 1984, high school students and brothers Boubkir and Tahar Douraidi were among the 31 protesters jailed in Boulamharez Prison. They came from an already politicised family. Their mother, Sadia Douraidi, born in the city in 1940, had participated in the conveyance of correspondence and armaments, as well as in the placement of explosive devices during the anticolonial struggle.<sup>107</sup> An active member of the MPPF, the mother-courage of Marrakesh engaged in sit-ins, protests, requested meetings with the authorities, and disseminated several appeals through the press to denounce the prison conditions her children endured.<sup>108</sup>

On June 23, 1984, the Douraidi brothers, together with six other fellows, initiated an open-ended hunger strike with the aim of conducting visits with their families, obtaining necessary medical attention, and pursuing their studies while in prison. Due to the hunger strike, Boubkir Douraidi, along with his mate Mustapha Belhouari, tragically passed away at the young age of 18 on August 27, 1984. Political prisoners’ families attended Boubkir Douraidi’s funeral in large numbers.<sup>109</sup> Following the death of her eldest son, Sadia addressed a letter of accusation to the Minister of the Interior and persisted in her dedication to advocating for her other son, Tahar, who remained incarcerated.<sup>110</sup> On 17 March 1990, at the age of 50, she passed away from a cerebral haemorrhage.<sup>111</sup> This happened shortly after she saw for the last time her 21-year-old son, who had ended his last hunger strike in the Meknes Prison just a few months earlier.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Razi 2024. Majdouli 2020: 69-70.

<sup>104</sup> Razi 2024.

<sup>105</sup> Majdouli 2020: 70.

<sup>106</sup> Razi 2024.

<sup>107</sup> N.n. 1990, 2; Daoud 1994: 256.

<sup>108</sup> See for instance: n.n. 1985: 9; n.n. 1985: 4.

<sup>109</sup> Menebhi 2000: 119.

<sup>110</sup> N.n. 1988: 7.

<sup>111</sup> Rollinde 2003: 491; N.n. 1990: 2.

<sup>112</sup> N.n. 1990: 2; Amnesty International 1989.

#### 4. Claiming the truth and embracing testimony on national and international levels

When the repressive grip of the Years of Lead reached its apex in the 1970s, the MPPF played a pioneering role in the advocacy for freedom and democracy. Significantly, the MPPF paved the way for the foundation of the Association marocaine des droits humains (AMDH) in 1979. While Mi Fama and Jocelyne Laabi were among the MPPF's members who contributed to establish the AMDH,<sup>113</sup> many New Left militants and former political prisoners joined the association to work on the dossiers of the militants who were missing and did not result in any prison.<sup>114</sup> AMDH's establishment occurred one year prior to Morocco's signature of the Charter of Human Rights on August 2, 1980, an act in line with an opening to international standards on the preservation of human rights, albeit in appearance rather than substance.<sup>115</sup>

In the second half of the 1980s, the Left parties' interest in the issue of the political prisoners finally emerged amid a quite varied political climate that allowed for greater overtures towards associationism and pluralism. The USFP's journal *al-Ittiḥād al-iṣtirākī* started to relaunch families' appeals, and, in 1988, a group of USFP militants established the Organisation marocaine des droits (OMDH). Publicly referencing the "secret gardens of the king during the Congress of May 1991, where the political opponent had been imprisoned for years, the OMDH sought the truth about the victims of enforced disappearance and the release of political prisoners.<sup>116</sup>

At the end of the 1980s, internal frictions arose within the MPPF due to the divergencies of the imprisoned political groups and the new approach taken by Left parties seeking to control the MPPF.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, the MPPF's long-lasting engagement yielded the results demanded for decades. Between August and September 1991, an amnesty allowed the release of several Marxist–Leninist political prisoners from Kenitra Central Prison, and most celebrated the event at Oummi Fatma's place. Until July 1994, a series of amnesties produced the release of all the New Left political prisoners from the other prisons.<sup>118</sup>

Although many families were able to welcome their loved ones back home, there were still a handful of families whose relatives were still unaccounted for. That was the case, among the others, of Houcine Manouzi. His mother, Khadija Chaou, following the imprisonment of her husband and three of her seven children, persevered in her family's small trade and singlehandedly raised her

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<sup>113</sup> Razi 2024; Laabi 2005: 249.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Rollinde 2003: 215.

<sup>116</sup> Santucci - Benhlal 1991: 788-789.

<sup>117</sup> González Riera 2014.

<sup>118</sup> Amnesty International 1994; N.n. 1994, 1.



children, ensuring them an education.<sup>119</sup> She actively engaged in the activities of the MPPF, being arrested with her daughter Fatima.<sup>120</sup> While her husband and two of her sons were finally freed, her son Houcine, who was abducted in Tunisia in 1972 by Moroccan security agents and transported to Morocco, managed to escape the detention site Point Fixe 3 in Rabat. Subsequently, every evidence of his existence vanished.<sup>121</sup> In a similar vein, Fatima Skalli Rouissi experienced the abduction and subsequent detention of her three children, Abdelhak, Jamaledine, and Mohamed, respectively, in 1964, 1972, and 1973.<sup>122</sup> Although the authorities eventually set free two of her sons, they never definitively clarified the circumstances surrounding Abdelhak's death.<sup>123</sup>

In light of the end of the New Left political prisoners' issue and the persisting phenomenon of enforced disappearances, the early 1990s marked a turning point for the MPPF, which resulted in new associative forms. The loosening of restrictions on associationism during that time led to the establishment of a formal association with the goal of uncovering the truth about political prisoners still missing. In 1992, the Manouzi and Rouissi families, along with the Ouezzan and Ouassouli families,<sup>124</sup> established the Comité de coordination des familles de disparus où le sort reste inconnu et des victimes de disparitions forcées au Maroc (CCFDM). Over the years, the CCFDM oversaw the efforts of the relatives of the missing political prisoners, organising public gatherings, sit-ins, hunger strikes, and pilgrimages to Tazmamart, Derb Moulay Cherif in Casablanca, and other detention sites in Tinghr and Nador.<sup>125</sup>

Since the later years of Hassan II's rule and the ascension of his son Muhammad VI to the monarchy in July 1999, the issue of the gross violations of human rights has become of public domain. In November 1999, former political prisoners established the Forum pour la vérité et la justice (FVJ, in Arabic: al-Muntadā min 'ağl al-ḥaqīqa wa-l-'inṣāf) to ask for justice and the truth for the victims of the Years of Lead in accordance with international transitional justice norms.<sup>126</sup> The FVJ also arranged commemorative pilgrimages to the main detention sites of the Years of Lead, also attended by the AMDH, CCFDM, OMDH, and representatives of the Comités de lutte contre la répression au Maroc.<sup>127</sup> With pride, Khadija Chaou took part in every "Caravan for the Truth", uniting with other

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<sup>119</sup> Manouzi 2024. Born in 1922 in Tizi n'Tichka, in the High Atlas region, Khadija Chaou married Ali Manouzi, whose family was prominently active in the anticolonial struggle, and then relocated to Casablanca.

<sup>120</sup> Manouzi 2024; De Boer 2005: 84.

<sup>121</sup> Over the years, she received contradictory information about Abdelhak's death and burial place. Manouzi 2024.

<sup>122</sup> Rouissi, 2004b: 43.

<sup>123</sup> Amnesty International, 2009: 11; De Boer - Saoudi 2005: 86. His body was eventually identified in a communal burial site in the late 2000s.

<sup>124</sup> Menin, 2017: 25-54.

<sup>125</sup> Manouzi 2024.

<sup>126</sup> N.n. 2000: 8.

<sup>127</sup> Vairel 2005: 47-70.

women who endured brutality during the Years of Lead.<sup>128</sup> In the meantime, human rights activists and former political prisoners reunited in France in the Association de parents et amis de disparus au Maroc (APADM) significantly supported the initiatives of the families of enforced disappearance's victims.<sup>129</sup>

In the early 2000s, the cause of Moroccan political prisoners' enforced disappearance was included in international networks of solidarity. Khadija Rouissi, sister of the forcibly disappeared Abdelhak, held the position of General Secretary in the FVJ's Administrative Office. She was also a member of the CCFDM and the AMDH's Administrative Commission. Rouissi played a key role in bringing the cause of enforced disappearance to the Réseau mondial de solidarité des mères, sœurs, filles, épouses, proches de personnes enlevées et disparues, which she contributed to establish in April 2000. This organisation was formed during the V Women's Voices Festival in Brussels, where activists from various countries including Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Rwanda, Lebanon, Turkey, Kurdistan, France, and Belgium were present.<sup>130</sup> Between 2000 and 2002, Rouissi participated in meetings held in Belgium, where she provided testimony regarding the widespread occurrence of enforced disappearances and human rights violations in Morocco. She highlighted the mistreatment by the police towards the women active in the MPPF, including her own arrest in 1985, and underlined its continuity with the families of enforced disappearance's victims.<sup>131</sup> Rouissi advocated the establishment of an independent commission to address the grave human rights abuses that took place during the Years of Lead, as well as the penal liability of perpetrators.<sup>132</sup>

In response to pressures from civil society, Morocco publicly acknowledged the political violence of previous decades in the same year. In 2004–2005 the transitional justice initiative Instance équité et réconciliation (IER) was established to specifically address human rights violations and offer reparations to the victims of the Years of Lead.<sup>133</sup> Under the leadership of former political prisoner Driss Benzekri, the IER produced more than 9,700 records and acknowledged compensation for 8,200 violation cases.<sup>134</sup> Nevertheless, the IER's handling of the situation faced criticism from numerous observers due to the lack of accountability of the individuals responsible for the violence, as well as

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<sup>128</sup> Manouzi 2024.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> N.n. 2004b: 108. Among the Middle East and North African members of the Réseau mondial de solidarité des mères, épouses, sœurs, filles, proches de personnes enlevées et disparues, there was the Comité des parents des personnes enlevées et portées disparues au Liban, established by Wadad Halawani in November 1982, and the Collectif des familles des disparu(e)s en Algérie (CFDA), founded in Paris in 1998, and SOS Disparus, established in Algeria three years later. N.n. 2004a: 110.

<sup>131</sup> Rouissi 2004a: 60 and 65.

<sup>132</sup> Rouissi 2004b: 43; Rouissi 2004a: 60.

<sup>133</sup> Wilcox 2009: 49-68; Vairel 2008: 229-241.

<sup>134</sup> Slyomovics 2008a: 107-8.

the restriction on publicly identifying them throughout public hearings.<sup>135</sup>

However, the IER specifically addressed the gender implications of political violence,<sup>136</sup> encouraging women to play a major role in the public hearings by sharing their experiences of past abuses.<sup>137</sup> Under the direct request of Driss Benzekri, Oummi Fatma delivered a speech during the inaugural public hearing held in Rabat on December 21, 2004 (Fig. 2).<sup>138</sup> She traced the beginnings and activities of the MPPF, integrating her own family narrative with the collective endeavours carried out by other mothers hailing from Tangier, Tétouan, Nador, and Marrakesh. Also broadcast on television national channels, she publicly testified how they launched protests, organised hunger strikes alongside their incarcerated children, and sit-ins at courts, mosques, ministries, and prefectures, despite experiencing maltreatment, threats, and arrests. As she affirmed: « Même les mères des prisonniers, des femmes âgées à l'époque, n'ont pas échappé à la cruauté du système ». <sup>139</sup>



Fig. 2 Oummi Fatma at the IER's public auditions in Rabat. *Le Reporter* n. 318, 23-24 December, 2004.

Zahra Lakhdar attended in Marrakesh's public hearing. She was the mother of Mohamed Grina, a high school student who was arrested on April 7, 1979, and transferred from Casablanca to Agadir,

<sup>135</sup> Slyomovics, 2008b: 123-148; Vairel, 2008: 229-241.

<sup>136</sup> Guillerot 2011.

<sup>137</sup> Rhani 2021, 105-132.

<sup>138</sup> Semlali 2024.

<sup>139</sup> Tounassi 2004: 6.

where he was subjected to severe torture. Three days prior to his death, occurred on April 24, the hospital allowed his mother to visit him. Zahra Lakhdar claimed at the public hearing that she had been politicised following this event (« Quelles que soient les convictions de mon fils, le martyr Grina, j'y adhère. Je le lui ai promis alors qu'il était sur son lit de mort ») and she shared the names of the policemen who caused her son's death, Jdidi and Rahal, despite the obligation not to name the torturers.<sup>140</sup>

In response to the restrictions imposed by the IER, the AMDH established a parallel programme of public hearings, held between February and July 2005 in Rabat, that were unencumbered by content constraints of the official transitional justice. Among the attendees, Oumm Fakhita Al-Hilali, mother of Khadija, Saida and Abdelaziz Menebhi, expressed the anguish stemming from her children's incarceration and the death of her daughter Saida during the 1977 hunger strike, alongside the shared adversities endured by the political prisoners' families.<sup>141</sup>

## **5. Conclusions. Mothers and the making of civic resistance**

Beginning in the early 1970s and persisting over the most repressive phase of the Years of Lead, the MPPF assumed a trailblazing role in advancing justice and human rights, as well as implementing civil society's room of action. Active from before the founding of the movement of women's rights in the 1980s, the MPPF remarkably emerged as the first female social movement in contemporary Morocco. Known for its spontaneity and intergenerational solidarity, it ended in the first half of the 1990s with the release of the New Left's political prisoners. Nonetheless, its driving force has persisted in recent decades, taking on new associative forms to pursue the truth about the ongoing issue of enforced disappearance's victims.

Certainly, former New Left political prisoners acknowledged the women's battle on their behalf, as well as the moral and material support provided to them.<sup>142</sup> Collectively confronting the pain of material and moral loss, firmly challenging authorities in ministries, tribunals, and jails, and fortifying their national and international networks, they have emerged as unprecedented agents of protest in Morocco. In particular, mothers have risen above the subaltern status from which most of them came, demonstrating a remarkable ability to gather support for their imprisoned children, staying united, and overcoming divisions over the years. Their journey within the MPPF was truly

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<sup>140</sup> Berrissoule 2005: 32.

<sup>141</sup> Al-Hilali 2006: 57-59.

<sup>142</sup> Bouissef Rekab 2024: 157; Miftah 2005: 76.

transformative, heightening their personal, social, and political awareness and empowering them to reach an effective change for the political prisoners.<sup>143</sup> In several cases, mothers drew upon their prior political engagement in the anticolonial movement, establishing a notable continuity in the pursuit of freedom between the colonial and postcolonial eras.

In the mid-2000s, the official transitional justice acknowledged the role of political prisoners' families in struggling for human rights. As the final report of the IER stated, they made a "major contribution to our modern history and to the process of dealing with the file of the violations of the past."<sup>144</sup> The phenomenon of New Left family activism, however, has yet to be integrated into Moroccan national history as a whole, whereas many other women active in the MPPF were almost forgotten.<sup>145</sup> According to Fatna El Bouih, a human and gender rights activist and a New Left political prisoner from 1977 to 1982, Mi Fama, disappeared on March 19, 2004, has been one of the most overlooked women in Moroccan contemporary history. El Bouih has prised the Association Marocaine pour les droits des femmes (AMDF), under the initiative of women's rights activist Najat Razi, to honouring Mi Fama by naming after her their anti-violence and counselling centre for women, which opened in Casablanca in 1998.<sup>146</sup>

An exception was Touria Sekkat, died on February 18, 1992, who has been recognised on a national level for her political and civic engagement, receiving tributes on the press, and having schools and a cultural complex in Casablanca named after her.<sup>147</sup> In recent years, Moroccan civil society has acknowledged Oummi Fatma, a semiliterate widow who traced the path of family activism, as the symbol of the MPPF's struggle.<sup>148</sup> Her disappearance on November 13, 2014 caused an outpouring of commotion. Just a few days after her death, the second World Human Rights Forum convened in Marrakesh remembered her, alongside Mi Fama and Assia El Oudie. Significantly, post-2011 civil society networks look at Oummi Fatma's example. On January 30, 2015, the Printemps de la dignité, a coalition of 23 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that advocate for gender rights, convened a tribute to her at the Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc in Rabat.<sup>149</sup> Besides, in November 2019, Oummi Fatma was at the core of the Nador Film Festival's 8th Edition, dedicated to the theme « La mémoire de l'avenir ».<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Majid 1980: 184-185.

<sup>144</sup> Kingdom of Morocco 2006: 50.

<sup>145</sup> El Guabli 2019: 57-78.

<sup>146</sup> Maisterra 2021.

<sup>147</sup> El Oudie 2022; El Oudie 2002.

<sup>148</sup> Miftah 2014: 20.

<sup>149</sup> Semlali 2024.

<sup>150</sup> Semlali 2024. Hassan Semlali currently serves as the president of the Driss Benzekri Foundation for Human Rights and Democracy, which was established in 2008 in memory of the leader of the IER.

To this day, former members of the MPPF and those who struggle against enforced disappearance continue to participate in International Workers' Day demonstrations coordinated by the CDT.<sup>151</sup> Additionally, local NGOs, such as the Association médicale de réhabilitation des victimes de la torture (AMRVT), established by Abdelkrim Manouzi in Casablanca in 2005, continue to transmit the memory of political prisoners' mothers. His own mother, Khadija Chaou (Fig. 3) died on October 30, 2016, at the age of 94 without hearing definitive news regarding her son Houcine's enforced disappearance.



Fig. 3. Khadija Chaou with a portrayal of his son Houcine Manouzi in the 2000s. Credits: Abdelkrim Manouzi.

The AMRVT continue to celebrate the mothers of the victims of the Years of Lead in events attended by numerous former MPPF members, human rights activists, and relatives of journalists and activists who nowadays are facing persecution and arrest as prisoners of conscience.<sup>152</sup> Such encounters strengthen the intergenerational continuity of the families opposing carceral repression and revitalize the concrete solidarity that had been characterising the MPPF for over 30 years of the past century.

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<sup>151</sup> Manouzi 2024.

<sup>152</sup> Author's attendance at the meetings at the AMVRT headquarters. Casablanca, March 22 and May 28, 2022. Among the attendees were Fatiha Cherribi, mother of Omar Radi, and Khouloud Mokhtari, wife of Souleiman Raissouni. Omar Radi and Souleiman Raissouni, both journalists, were among the prisoners of conscience granted regal pardon by King Muhammad VI on the 25th Throne Day, on July 30, 2024. Metz 2024.

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