

# The Bikini Strategy

## Gender and Class Relations in Algeria

*by Jennifer Bidet*

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**Last summer, bikini-wearing women on Algerian beaches were a hot topic in the French news. Presented for a while as a feminist revolt against the rise of Islam, this issue is above all symptomatic of the gender relations, but also the class and race relations, structuring Algerian society.**

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After the controversy surrounding burkini-wearing women on French beaches in the summer of 2016,<sup>1</sup> a new swimwear affair caught the attention of the French press last summer, reminding us that the beach is a political space that highlights gender, class, and 'race' relations, but that also serves as a catalyst for them (Bidet and Devienne, 2017). This affair exemplifies the ideological stances that have crystallised in France around issues combining feminism and Islam. It is also highly representative of recent changes in gender relations in Algerian society. Running counter to the tendency to stigmatise Islam, and Muslims in particular, by denouncing the condition of Muslim women, the analysis of this new beach affair calls for a shift in perspective. It requires an approach taking into consideration the social dynamics specific to Algerian society, independently from the French political context.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a perspective on the 'burkini affair' see Granger, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> During my sociology doctorate, which focused on holidays spent in Algeria by descendants of Algerian immigrants, I conducted 3 fieldwork trips in Algeria for a total of 6 months, as well as research in France. The present analysis draws on this experience, as well as knowledge of the relevant literature.

## A feminist revolt in Algeria?

It is worth first recapping the facts widely reported in the French press.<sup>3</sup> On July 13, 2017 the weekly magazine *Marianne* published an article about women ‘campaigning to finally be able to go swimming without being sexually harassed’.<sup>4</sup> The article presented a Facebook group created by a young woman from Annaba (a coastal city in the east of Algeria and the fourth largest city in the country) to organise group trips to the beach in order to allow the women who wished to bathe in a swimming costume to do so and to avoid the usual sexual harassment they face. *Marianne* had picked up a story published by a local newspaper in Annaba, *Le Provincial*,<sup>5</sup> in which journalist Lilia Mechakra provided an account of these outings. The information was quickly taken up by several French national newspapers<sup>6</sup> and a certain amount of confusion ensued about how many women had ‘mobilised’. Some articles reported that 3000 women met at the beach whereas that was in fact the number of followers of the Facebook page.<sup>7</sup> Others reported smaller gatherings, of between 20 and 200 women but, according to the AFP<sup>8</sup> [Agence France Presse], it seems no journalist actually observed such numbers. One way or another, this made a good story to cover, echoing the previous year’s burkini controversy, as an event identified as a feminist mobilisation using methods that seemed amusing and were suitably light-hearted for the tone expected from the press in the summer holidays:

Since early July, the seaside resort of Annaba (...) has become a space for fairly unusual feminist demonstrations. To fight against moralising attitudes, women have been organising trips to the beach... in bikinis.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the context of this article, I have limited my analysis to the French press in which this affair created a controversy.

<sup>4</sup> *Marianne*, 13/7/2017, Floriane Valdayron ‘En Algérie, ces femmes militent pour pouvoir enfin se baigner sans être harcelées sexuellement’ [In Algeria, women are campaigning to finally be able to go swimming without being sexually harassed].

<sup>5</sup> *Le Provincial*, 10/7/2017, Lilia Mechakra, ‘Devant le mutisme des autorités. Les "Bônoises" prennent les choses en main’ [Faced with the silence of the authorities, the women from ‘Bone’ take matters into their own hands].

<sup>6</sup> ‘Algérie : la contre-attaque des bikinis’ [Algeria: the bikini counter attack] (*L’Obs*, 18/7/2017); ‘Sur les plages algériennes, le bikini pourrait faire évoluer les mentalités’ [On Algerian beaches, bikinis could change attitudes] (*La Croix*, 19/7/2017); ‘Algérie : des femmes se battent pour porter des bikinis sur la plage sans se faire harceler’ [Algeria: women fighting to be able to wear bikinis on the beach without being harassed], (*La Parisienne*, the Parisien newspaper’s women’s magazine), 27/7/2017; ‘La leçon de liberté des Algériennes en bikini’ [The lesson in freedom by Algerian women in bikinis] (*Le Figaro*, 28/7/2017). This was also covered by television channels (BFM TV, France 3, LCI) and the regional press (particularly the dailies owned by the Crédit Mutuel).

<sup>7</sup> Television channel LCI published an article on its website the 3/8/2017 entitled ‘Algérie : la révolte du bikini s’étend’ [Algeria: the spread of the bikini revolt] claiming ‘At first, there were 50-odd female activists; at their last event, they numbered almost 3600!’

<sup>8</sup> *Arrêt sur images*, 8/8/2017, Robin Andraca: ‘According to the AFP, which has looked into the matter, no foreign nor Algerian journalist was able to actually observe the reality of this “revolution”. The only “proof” was a photo posted on Twitter on July 12<sup>th</sup> by an anonymous female user showing the backs of around twenty women in swimming costumes supposedly taken at Annaba. Approximately twenty and not “nearly 3600” as [TV channel] LCI would go on to write.’

<sup>9</sup> LCI website, 3/8/2017, ‘Algérie : la révolte du bikini s’étend’ [Algeria: the spread of the bikini revolt].

According to the press, this ‘mobilisation’,<sup>10</sup> ‘revolt’,<sup>11</sup> or ‘counter-attack’<sup>12</sup> was prompted by a form of ‘religious obscurantism’<sup>13</sup> that is presented as increasingly prevalent in Algerian society and is supposed to weigh heavily on women’s rights.<sup>14</sup> The articles took up the argument put forward by the journalist in *Le Provincial* that mentioned cyber bullying by ‘young men’ acting as the ‘morality police’<sup>15</sup> and encouraging users to post photos of young women in bikinis at the beach on social media to discourage them from wearing outfits considered too revealing. Screen grabs of Facebook pages vaunting the moral qualities of Muslim women bathing in burkinis and denouncing bikini wearing were widely taken up in articles in the French press.<sup>16</sup> These included, for example, a photo of a placard with the slogan: ‘I swim in my hijab and leave nudity to animals’.<sup>17</sup> *La Croix* cited journalist Lilia Mechakra writing that ‘the phenomenon is recent (...). In our parents’ time, people were more liberated and bathed in swimming costumes without any problems. But since the dark decade (Ed. note: The civil war between the government and several Islamist groups between 1991 and 2002), young people have become used to the veil’.<sup>18</sup> The final piece of evidence drawn upon to prove this supposed rise of Islamism in Algeria and its repercussions on women’s rights was cited by *Marianne*: a bill put forward during the month of Ramadan by a group of ‘ultra-conservative’ parliamentarians about regulating women’s clothing.<sup>19</sup>

On August 4<sup>th</sup>, *Marianne* announced that a ‘giant Republican swim’ was planned for August 7<sup>th</sup> at Tichy, a seaside resort on the Kabylia coast. However, on August 7<sup>th</sup> the journalists on site found no trace of the demonstration. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, the media discourse shifted based on an article by the AFP. *Le Monde* wrote “‘Opérations bikini’ en Algérie, un ‘fantasme’ repris par la presse française” [‘Operation Bikini’ in Algeria: a ‘fantasy’ taken up by the French press], *Libération* ‘Une fausse “opération bikini” en Algérie enflamme les médias français [Fake ‘Operation Bikini’ fires up French press] and the *Huffington Post* “Révolte des bikinis”, en Algérie: beaucoup de bruits pour presque rien’ [The Bikini revolt in Algeria: much ado about almost nothing’]. The articles pointed to a hoax launched by a mischievous internet user who apparently created a fake Facebook event entitled ‘On August 7<sup>th</sup>, I’ll swim naked’

<sup>10</sup> *Marianne*, 13/7/2017, Floriane Valdayron, art. cited.

<sup>11</sup> *Le Figaro*, 28/7/2017, Céline Pina, ‘La leçon de liberté des Algériennes en bikini’ [The lesson in freedom by Algerian women in bikinis]; *Le Parisien*, 3/8/2017, Cyprien Pézeril, ‘Elles se battent pour porter le bikini’ [Women fighting to wear bikinis], LCI, 3/8/2017.

<sup>12</sup> *L’Obs*, 18/7/2017, Jadine Labbé Pacheco, ‘Algérie : la contre-attaque des bikinis’ [Algeria: the bikini counter attack].

<sup>13</sup> *Le Point*, 27/7/2017, Idriss Elram, ‘Algérie : les secrets d’une campagne pro-bikini’ [Algeria: The secrets of a pro-bikini campaign].

<sup>14</sup> *Marianne* referred to a ‘retaliation to the worsening of women’s position in society’, *Marianne*, 4/8/17, Atmane Tazaghart, ‘Algérie. Les baigneuses se rebiffent’ [Algeria. Female bathers rebel].

<sup>15</sup> *Le Provincial*, 10/7/2017, Lilia Mechakra, art. cited.

<sup>16</sup> See for example *L’Obs*, 18/7/2017, Jadine Labbé Pacheco, art. cited.

<sup>17</sup> This dehumanization is reminiscent to some extent of the same process analysed by C. Granger regarding reactions when swimming costumes began to be worn on French beaches in the 1930s. A priest in western France, for example, congratulated people for attacking bathers: ‘You have booed these shameless people! Well done! Do not let pigs and savages rule the streets.’

<sup>18</sup> *La Croix*, 19/7/2017, Salomé Parent, ‘Sur les plages algériennes, le bikini pourrait faire évoluer les mentalités’ [On Algerian beaches, bikinis could change attitudes].

<sup>19</sup> *Marianne*, 4/8/2017, Atmane Tazaghart, ‘Algérie. Les baigneuses se rebiffent’ [Algeria. Female bathers rebel].

[*nue* in French; the feminine form of the adjective] to prove the lack of consistency in information circulating on social media. Articles attacked *Marianné's* journalistic ethics, talking about the magazine having failed to exercise sufficient caution and having propagated fake news.

The interpretation of the event changed. Were these collective swims a symbolic protest by feminist activists denouncing the triumph of a rigid form of Islam or in fact a pragmatic way to escape 'insistent gazes' and 'inappropriate remarks' at the beach? The articles also reported excerpts from an interview with an Algerian sociologist, Yamina Rahou, rejecting both the societal model to which fundamentalist Islam aspires and the model conveyed by 'Westerners' and criticising the French media frenzy about this issue.<sup>20</sup> *Le Monde* and *Libération* newspapers sent local correspondents to the Algerian beaches. From *Le Monde*, Zahra Chenaoui went to meet people on a beach on the outskirts of Algiers. The introductory paragraph sets the tone:

On the Algerian beaches, there is no 'bikini revolt' and no debate about the 'burkini': instead, there are women faced with sexist behaviour and harassment.<sup>21</sup>

The article did not deny the realities of the harassment experienced by women on the beaches, but aimed to reflect the complexity of experiences and practices. Above all, the journalist met with young women who said they admired the women's mobilisation in Annaba but were amused to discover, through the journalist, that it was actually a Facebook group allowing women to organise collective trips to the beach:

*'Apparently, in Annaba, the women are starting a revolution!'* The two sisters, who speak good French, watch French television channels thanks to a hacked decoder (...). When we explain that actually it's around thirty women who arrange to meet using the social media network, Nassima laughs: *'Oh, but that's like when we go to the beach with our friends at the weekend! We use Facebook, it's easier'*.

A correspondent for *Libération*, Zhora Ziani, met with Annaba residents belonging to the Facebook group. These young women explained how uncomfortable they were with media coverage of the affair and how their motives had been reframed in terms that far exceeded them:

'They started using words that we never used, like "Islamism" and "obscurantism" said Nouria. 'We weren't denouncing physical assaults, which we'd never experienced on this beach, or women wearing burkinis, which we don't have a problem with" added Sarah.<sup>22</sup>

The article concluded with the anger felt by the protagonists about how the French media had exploited this story:

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<sup>20</sup> *Le Monde*, 8/7/2017, "Opérations bikini" en Algérie, un "fantasme" repris par la presse française' ['Operation Bikini' in Algeria: a 'fantasy' taken up by the French press].

<sup>21</sup> *Le Monde*, 10/8/2017, Zohra Chenaoui, art. cited.

<sup>22</sup> *Libération*, 13/8/2017, Zhora Ziani, 'En Algérie, après la polémique française, l'amertume à la plage' [In Algeria, bitterness at the beach after the French controversy].

Djaffar, Sarah's husband, is even angrier: 'At first, without any animosity, they just wanted there to be more girls on the beach, but they weren't attacking anyone. Now, hundreds of Algerian men feel under fire from this initiative and are responding violently on social media. Do you know what you've done? You've created the conflict'.<sup>23</sup>

*Marianne* magazine jumped to its own defence. First, in a qualifying statement by the journalist under fire, drawing a distinction between the 'On August 7<sup>th</sup>, I'll swim naked' hoax and the 'Republican swim' that he had announced for the same date.<sup>24</sup> According to him, the 'Republican swim' at Tichy was cancelled because of the media frenzy around the event and the feminist activists' fear of finding themselves faced with an aggressive crowd of curious onlookers. On August 10<sup>th</sup>, the editor-in-chief took to the columns of the magazine in a pugnacious piece entitled '*Marianne*, women in Algeria, and denial'. The aim was to mount a defence against the 'smear campaign' launched by 'Conservative Islamic circles' and reported by 'some French media outlets', which he described as 'useful idiots of obscurantism' who 'delight in applying the shameful label of "Islamophobia" to those who defend secularism' and 'downplay the responsibility of Islamist assailants by making them out to be the unfortunate victims of France's colonial past'. And he concludes: 'We have to have the courage to look [reality] in the face in order to change it. This is what *Marianne* will endeavour to do in the future as it has in the past, continuing its relentless fight for women's rights in Algeria, in France, and elsewhere'.

## **The bikini as a republican symbol?**

The whole affair is highly telling when it comes to how news is produced, the competition social media creates for the traditional press in terms of how information circulates, and the economic pressures weighing on journalism. However, an ideological debate also fuelled this controversy. The bikini affair in Algeria was an occasion for the French press, once again, to raise the issue of the compatibility between feminism and Islam. In its editorial, *Marianne* took the side of the *Printemps Républicain* movement ['Republican Spring'], whose Manifesto it had already reported and supported in March 2016.<sup>25</sup> In other words, it took the side of the personalities claiming to belong to a French left-wing concerned with 'defending secularism and the Republican pact'. Consistent with the ideological stance of this Manifesto, *Marianne* denounced the soft line taken by some of the left wing regarding Islamism by refusing to prohibit full veils or burkinis.

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<sup>23</sup> *Libération*, 13/8/2017, Zhora Ziani, art. cited.

<sup>24</sup> *Marianne*, 8/7/2017, Atmane Tazaghart, "Révolution du bikini" en Algérie et baignade du 7 août : Non, *Marianne* n'a pas relayé une fake news' ['The bikini revolution' in Algeria and the 7th August swim: No, *Marianne* did not report fake news].

<sup>25</sup> *Marianne*, 20/3/2016, 'Manifeste pour un printemps républicain' [Manifesto for a republican spring].

The expression ‘Republican swim’, which first appeared in Algerian newspapers, must have seemed a true stroke of luck when it came to framing these actions as a fight converging with the Republican Spring. However, the adjective ‘republican’ should be understood in the specific Algerian national context. It had been used a few years earlier to describe forms of civil disobedience by atheist Algerians who had organised ‘Republican lunches’ in the middle of Ramadan (when Muslims fast during the day) in order to denounce the criminalisation of those not fasting.<sup>26</sup> This can be seen as a nod in the direction of the ‘Republican banquets’ organised in France during the French Revolution and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> These collective protests largely took place in Kabylia and targeted the central state (as represented by the police arresting non-fasters). The Algerian Republic is based on a state religion and makes no claim to be secular. It was in fact the French colonial state that first maintained a legal status defined by religious affiliation, when it chose not to apply the famous 1905 law (separating Church and State) in the French departments of Algeria (Papi, 2010).

In reaction to French colonisation, the Arabic-Islamic reference point was central in defining Algerian nationalism. The independent Algerian State defined itself as a Republic with its language – Arabic – and its religion – Islam. In doing so, it erased the linguistic and religious diversity of the country. Given that few Algerian Jews and Christians remained in the country after the independence in 1962, the non Arabic-speaking populations of the country were the main critics of these aspects of the new independent State, and particularly the Kabyles as a Berber-speaking group. It was above all as a linguistic and cultural minority that some of the Kabyles also called for religious freedom. This denunciation of the prominent place of Islam in Algeria is difficult to equate with the ideological position of the tenants of the Republican Spring because, in the French context, Islam is obviously not a State religion and those practising the religion occupy a socially and politically dominated position.

By claiming to continue their ‘relentless fight for women’s rights in Algeria, in France, and elsewhere’, *Marianne* brushed aside all intersectional considerations regarding social struggles. Political movements and academic research have called into question the supposed universalism of the feminist cause, emphasising the diverging interests of women of different classes, races, or nationalities. The civil rights movement in the United States allowed black women to question the links between sexism and racism (Wallace, Smith, Lorde, and Dorlin, 2008). Yes, black men in the civil rights movement did behave in sexist ways. At the same time, these women did not always identify with the demands of feminist movements led by white upper-class women. What is the solution to this problem? Should a hierarchy be created between the two evils of sexism and racism? And if so, how?

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<sup>26</sup> *L’Obs*, 4/8/2013, ‘Déjeuner public en plein ramadan, une première’ [Public lunch in the heart of Ramadan: a first]

<sup>27</sup> Unofficial political meetings taking the shape of large collective meals during which demands were expressed, for example widening the electorate or the advent of the Republic over the July Monarchy.

Lila Abu-Lughod, professor of anthropology at Columbia, is among the academics who have called into question how Western countries frame Muslim women as victims, in an essay entitled *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Abu-Lughod, 2013). In France, this kind of analysis is defended by sociologist and feminist activist Christine Delphy, whose critical stance towards the anti-veil laws earned her much hostility from some of her former comrades-in-arms from the 1970s movement (Delphy, 2006). In the French context, it is as if 'women's rights' today must necessarily work against 'minority rights' (Marion, 2013). However, the supposedly universalist view of feminism fails to account for the specific contexts in which gender relations should always be reframed and the ways in which sexist domination intersects with other forms of domination. This is why this affair surrounding the Algerian beaches has to be considered in connection with analysis of the broader social relations currently at play in Algerian society.

The testimonies reported in the press implicitly reveal other social dynamics that can shed different light on this issue. Like many public spaces in Algeria,<sup>28</sup> beaches are a locus of sexual segregation. Sometimes this is entirely informal, because men and women have learnt from childhood to identify the invisible borders separating legitimate spaces for each sex. Sometimes, however, this segregation is also explicit. In Algeria, restaurants, concert halls, and beaches can offer 'family' spaces, i.e. for married couples with or without children or for groups of women, with the 'family' label largely serving to exclude men not accompanied by a woman. Conversely, women – whatever their family status – will not be as easily accepted in spaces that are not explicitly designated as being for 'families' and will find it harder to enter such spaces, whether alone or not. On public beaches that do not indicate whether or not they are 'family' beaches, women are few and more fully dressed than on other beaches. On 'family' beaches, however, there are more women often wearing a much broader range of clothing, from djellabas with a hijab to bikinis.

Finally, beaches that charge entrance fees have the highest proportion of women wearing short swimming costumes. In 2011, when I was in Algeria conducting fieldwork for my thesis, the burkini had begun to gain traction as an appealing solution for veil-wearing women from the middle and upper classes (due to its cost) who nonetheless wanted to swim in what they considered appropriate attire. When the burkini was framed as a new way of removing women's bodies from sight in the public space, an Algerian sociologist suggested that, on the contrary, it allowed 'the female body to be reinserted in the public space'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, when the women from Annaba were questioned about their collective swims, they emphasised that their aim had not been to impose a certain attire on beaches (bikinis), but rather to establish women's presence in the public space of the beach, whatever they chose to

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<sup>28</sup> I have analysed elsewhere the way in which women born in France to Algerian parents experience holidays spent 'back' in Algeria and how they deal with the different gender norms at play to those in France, particularly in terms of the forms of circulation between public and private spaces (Bidet, forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup> Fatima Oussedik, professor of sociology at the University of Algiers, quoted in *Slate Afrique*, 23/8/2016, 'En Algérie, le burkini est "une négociation entre la femme et la société"' [In Algeria, the burkini is 'a negotiation between women and society'].

wear, in the face of male harassment: the article in the local Algerian daily specified that ‘the group also included many burkini-wearers’.<sup>30</sup>

Undeniably, heavy norms weigh upon Algerian women’s behaviour at the beach and transgressing these norms brings various sanctions, ranging from contemptuous looks to different forms of verbal or even physical aggression. However, while the parallel may seem slightly audacious, social control over states of undress at the beach could also be said to exist in contexts that, at first glance, appear more favourable to women’s emancipation. While the advent of topless bathing seemed to mark progress in women’s rights, allowing them to spend time on the beach naked from the waist up, like men, Jean-Claude Kaufmann has shown the extent to which this practice was codified: drooping or imperfect breasts were not acceptable, and breasts should not be displayed too obviously by standing up; one could undress but following certain rules and not on all beaches (Kaufmann, 1998). While undressing on the beach seems a natural, and therefore desirable, thing in French society today, it is the result of a clearly identifiable historical process that cannot be reduced to the women’s liberation movement (Granger, 2017).

Faced with these norms, Algerian women – like women in other countries (Le Renard, 2011) – develop tactics to circumvent them. Organising to go to the beach together with friends and presenting a common front against unpleasant remarks and gestures is one such tactic, much like Parisian women may decide to go home as a group after going out late to avoid being assaulted (Lieber, 2008). That Algerian women might feel forced to organise to go to the beach together is entirely credible.

Above and beyond the social norms weighing on female mobility in the public space, what is the situation more broadly when it comes to women’s legal rights in Algeria? Given that no law formally prohibits wearing two-piece swimming costumes on Algerian beaches, the aim of the ‘bikini revolt’ was apparently more to ‘change attitudes’.<sup>31</sup> However, studies have shown how, from the 1980s onwards, the Algerian state (despite having fought armed Islamic forces in the 1990s) used the issue of religion, and particularly of women’s status in society, to its own ends. In 1984, the Algerian state adopted a Family Code that firmly established the model of the patriarchal family, limiting women’s rights and autonomy in Algerian society. This Family Code, a gesture made by the State to the Islamists at a time of political and economic uncertainty, sparked anger among the women who had fought in the war of independence and whose status was now diminished. Women’s declining place in Algeria did not, therefore, begin with the electoral victories of the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) at the end of the 1980s or even with the civil war.

In the 2000s, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco made substantial reforms to their Family Codes, considerably improving women’s rights (Dirèche-Slimani, 2007), without, however, entirely erasing the legal inequalities between women and men. Further legal progress

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<sup>30</sup> *Le Provincial*, 10/7/2017, Lilia Mechakra, art. cited.

<sup>31</sup> *La Croix*, 19/7/2017, Salomé Parent, art. cited.



occurred in the shape of the law passed in 2015 against violence against women by the Algerian Parliament and Senate.<sup>32</sup> In reaction to this law being passed, parliamentarians belonging to Islamist parties suggested legislation on women's clothing as a solution to the street harassment they faced in Algeria.<sup>33</sup> This suggestion is reminiscent of the bill mentioned by the journalist from *Marianne* in the August 4<sup>th</sup> article, except this 'bill' was not put forward in June 2017 but in 2015 and was in fact the transcription of a parliamentary debate rather than an actual bill or proposed amendment per se.<sup>34</sup>

Fundamental social evolutions have also been identified. Research has highlighted a progressive decline in early and arranged marriages replaced with later marriages (Ouadah-Bedidi, 2005) between freely chosen spouses (Kateb, 2011). In the space of a few years, Algerian women's access to education has also become more widespread: whereas in 1976, there were 331 men in higher education for every 100 women, in 2005 that proportion had shifted to only 68 men for 100 women. The women asked about the Algerian beaches in the articles written last summer included a 'pharmacy student',<sup>35</sup> a 'pharmacist',<sup>36</sup> a 'biochemist',<sup>37</sup> a journalist, etc. In 1987, women only made up 8% of the active population, whereas in 2011 this figure had risen to 17.7%.<sup>38</sup> While it remains low, it is clearly progressing.

The bikini revolt can therefore be viewed from a different angle than that of the rise of radical Islam. It could, in fact, be a reflection of the progressive emancipation of Algerian women through access to education and employment, an emancipation now looking to gain new ground, in the sphere of leisure, for example, and therefore on the beach. Obviously, it cannot be said that Algerian women enjoy the same rights as their fellow male citizens. However, there is a difference between claiming that women are being increasingly badly treated in a society crushed by the weight of Islamist ideology and underscoring that powerful gender inequalities still exist within a society and a state that have, de facto, seen progress in women's official and actual rights.

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<sup>32</sup> See for example *Huffington Post*, 'Le projet de loi sur les violences faites aux femmes bloqué au Sénat' [The bill on violence against women blocked in the Senate], 31/03/2015.

<sup>33</sup> *Algérie-Focus*, 4/3/2015, 'Algerian parliamentarians want a law against women dressing "provocatively"'. The argument, it has to be said, was delightful: 'In this regard, the parliamentarian from the El Karama 'Dignité' party, Mohamed Medaoui, underlined that some women dress provocatively: 'Through their clothing, they infringe upon decency and harass men', he added.'

<sup>34</sup> It is not impossible that this debate resurfaced in the Algerian parliament in June 2017, but to date I have not managed to find any trace of this event.

<sup>35</sup> *Marianne*, 10/8/2017, Floriane Valdayron, 'Baignades groupées en Algérie : "Notre but est de retrouver une liberté"' [Group swims in Algeria: our aim is to regain freedom].

<sup>36</sup> *L'Obs*, 18/7/2017, Jadine Labbé Pacheco, 'Algérie: la contre-attaque des bikinis' [Algeria: the bikini counter attack]

<sup>37</sup> *L'Obs*, 11/8/2017, Jadine Labbé Pacheco, 'Opérations bikini en Algérie "Notre action est une initiative locale"' [Operation Bikini in Algeria: Our action is a local initiative].

<sup>38</sup> Office National des Statistiques, 2012, *Enquête emploi auprès des ménages 2011*.

## Beneath the bikini, social classes

Finally, these beach-related issues also involve concerns beyond simply Islam and gender, as all beaches are not equally accessible depending on one's financial means. Some of the beaches on the Algerian coast offer services for a fee (parasols, sun loungers, etc.) or charge for entrance. Those that charge are often attached to luxury hotel complexes and the price for a day at the beach can be extortionately expensive for an Algerian salary (Bidet, 2017). Entrance to a fairly modest beach with an admission fee costs around 8 euros for an average monthly salary of 220 euros: the equivalent price based on the average salary in France (2200 euros) would be 75 euros for a day! Yet it is on beaches with entrance fees that it is easier to wear a bikini. Gender relations were therefore not the only issue at stake in the Annaba beach outings; class relations were also highly salient.

At the foot of a luxuriant green hill, nestled in a creek, lies Seraïdi beach, on the outskirts of Annaba. This used to be the favourite spot of many young women from Annaba. *'As soon as we were teenagers, explains Kenza, 30 years old, we couldn't go swimming on the beaches in the town centre, so we'd go to Seraïdi'*. Further away, at the bottom of a steep track, this beach was reserved for families who had a solid car. Since then, the road has been tarmacked and some buses now run there. *'The result is that there are more groups of young men. I prefer going to a private beach in Skikda [a neighbouring region, 100km away, Ed. note]'* explains Nouria.<sup>39</sup>

What made Seraïdi beach less comfortable for Nouria was not the rise in Islamism but rather the tarmacking of the road connecting this far away beach to Annaba. The men bothering the young women are not described as bearded men in djellabas preaching to them on the sand, but as 'groups of young men' arriving by bus because they don't have a 'solid car', i.e. young working-class men for whom the space of possibilities regarding seaside leisure has broadened with new bus routes running to the previously inaccessible beach. These are groups of young men who do not share the tastes and lifestyles of the educated middle- and upper-class women from the city; who seem vulgar and uncouth to such women; who often have to delay married life because they do not have a sufficiently stable economic situation to pay for the cost of a wedding and of married life; who, for this reason, have a relationship to sexuality and to women that is characterised by a certain 'frustration', as one of the women interviewed put it.<sup>40</sup> While this relationship to sexuality is obviously not disconnected from religious doctrine, it does also fall more widely into a specific socio-economic context that contributes to this frustration.

If women can be said to be mobilising, it is middle- and upper-class women looking to extend gender equality, because the beach tends to be a more distant concern for working-class Algerian women. It is also educated urban women who have mainly entered the job

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<sup>39</sup> *Libération*, 13/8/2017, Zhora Ziani, 'En Algérie, après la polémique française, l'amertume à la plage' [In Algeria, bitterness at the beach after the French controversy].

<sup>40</sup> 'These frustrated men won't prevent us from going to the beach', *L'Obs*, 18/7/2017, Jadine Labbé Pacheco, art. cited

market in Algeria: 43% of women with higher education qualifications are employed as opposed to 18% of those with a secondary-school qualification and 7% of those only educated to primary school level.<sup>41</sup> The lot of Algerian women from modest and rural backgrounds is not the same as that of their higher-class compatriots and their interests often differ also.

I am not claiming that this detracts from the legitimacy of the words and actions of the middle-class and upper-class women organising collective swims. However, the issue at stake is asking what social relations underpin these ‘beach battles’ in Algeria. Is it a question of a struggle between traditionalist Muslims and modern feminists, in yet another expression of the clash of civilisations heralded by Samuel Huntington? A clash between macho men and female victims? This article has not answered that particular question, but it has suggested a shift in analytical focus.

For historian Christophe Granger, the ‘beach battles’ of the 1930s in France, pitching bathers in swimming costumes against Catholic parishioners, revealed a power struggle between the old elites – local notables imbued with the values of traditional Catholicism – and the emerging middle classes, who were developing new cultural practices and new relationships to the body. While it is important not to draw a direct inapposite historical comparison framing current events in Algeria in terms of events in 1930s France, transposing this analysis does encourage us to ask what specific power struggles are thrown into light by this ‘bikini revolt’. Beyond the opposition between men and women, between the rich and the poor, between radical Islamists and secular or even atheist modernists, what fractures within the Algerian elite has this affair brought to light? ‘Muslim’ countries such as Algeria are not solely defined by the official religion of the State or the main religion of the population. It is important to remember that they are also affected by gender relations, of course, but also by class relations.

At the end of this reflection, the initial question remains: do Algerian women need saving? Questioning the desire expressed by certain French media outlets to save Algerian women does not mean questioning the realities of gender relations in Algeria, which are unequal in both legal and social terms. However it does mean questioning paternalistic stances towards the situation of Algerian women that dwell on its bleakest aspects. By presenting the bikini affair in an interpretative framework devised in a different setting and by isolating it from the broader context in which it was embedded, the controversy in the French press can seem broadly counter-productive in terms of its stated intended aim, i.e. encouraging Algerian women in fighting for their rights. Discourse about universal women’s rights (and human rights) can prove not only scientifically inaccurate but also politically counter-productive when conveyed by the very forces occupying the dominant position in power relations between countries and world regions.

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<sup>41</sup> Office National des Statistiques, 2012, *Enquête emploi auprès des ménages 2011*.

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