

Article

Failed Emancipations: Youth Transitions, Migration and the Future in Morocco

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Abstract: Various authors have highlighted the importance of marriage as a social marker that alter the social categorization of individuals and their relationships from youth to adulthood according to the cultural construction of the life course in Arab countries. This article aims to analyze the interaction between the socio-political framework (structure) and the capacity for individual action (agency) in the context of biographical experiences to achieve emancipation in Morocco. This perspective responds to the demand of different authors to include the subjective approaches of young people in the process of analysis. This analysis will be guided by some questions: Which is the capacity of young Arabs to decide the orientation of their life trajectories? What factors (cultural, family, socioeconomic, educational, etc.) create and shape the expectations of young people regarding their transition to adult life? Is there a specific model of emancipation in the Arab Mediterranean countries?

Keywords: Transition; Emancipation; Youth; Morocco

Blind and dirty, asked me for a dime, a dime for a cup of coffee.

I got no dime but I got some time to hear your story.

(Wharf Rat, Robert Hunter, 1969)

1. Introduction

In Morocco, the fast demographic change of recent decades has facilitated the emergence of a youthful population that is producing a significant change in the social composition of the country. According to data obtained during the survey on the socio-economic situation of the child and youth population (15-29 years old) carried out within the framework of the Sahwa project, this age cohort represents 32.10% of the population, being 16.14% in the case of boys and 16.09% for girls (Sahwa Survey, 2016)ⁱ. This demography implies that young people are gradually occupying a central place in the public sphere as a result of a combination of the neoliberal globalization process, the emergence of a civilizational discourse in which Islam positions itself in opposition to west, coupled with ever-increasing levels of college graduates suffering from unemployed conditions (Murphy, 2012). From youth perspective, they feel trapped in a world in which they are required to be married to become adults after acquire economic autonomy. As consequence, youths -both male and female- are placed in a social structure that understand young stage as a 'transitional period' to adulthood passing by the marriage or become a marginalized youngster trying to reclaim their youthfulness (Sánchez-Montijano & Sánchez-García, 2019).

This article aims to analyse the interaction between the socio-political framework (structure) and the capacity of individual action (agency) in the context of biographical experiences to achieve (or not) emancipation. In that sense, (structural) youth transitions and (agency) youth cultures are not alternative models but complementary dimensions of youth biographies (Feixa, 2021; Kelly, 2018). For this, after establishing a theoretical framework on emancipation and transition to adult life and youth agency as a significant concept to evaluate the capacity of youngsters to achieve emancipation, we present an ethnographic analysis of the data obtained during a field work carried out in the city of Tangier, Morocco, in 2021, describing and analyzing some elements that (would) frustrate the emancipation of young people in a situation of exclusion and marginalization. It is a matter of observing these impediments to understand one of the main effects of this failed transition: the desire for migration to Europe of these boys and girls since one of the great driving forces of the country for migration is the lack of expectations for the future. Forced to a nomadic and urban life, they place these young people in a permanent adolescence, seeking vital resources in an informal way, and therefore in a significant vulnerability. This perspective responds to the demand of different authors to include subjective approaches of youth in the analyses and exploring motivations for delayed emancipation (Salehi-Isfahani and Navtej, 2008).

2. Youth agency and emancipation in MENA region

Youth agency is affected by socially imposed identities. Years ago, Mary Douglas (1970) remarked that any social category is defined by identity attributes and characteristics through collective representations that are created by social institutions. In this sense, the discursive production of the “youth” category hides intersectional identities. The mechanism involves the diverse intersectional social identities of individuals designing their place in the social sphere. In relation with youth, the mechanisms create disadvantaged or privileged circumstances in which to decide about their life course (Furlong, 2009).

A critical sociological analysis of the relationship of young people to social institutions is one starting point for understanding agency as the capacity subjects have to act in the social space in which they are involved. In this way, the young are agents seeking to negotiate their lives with the reality that surrounds them, producing a transformation in the former while at the same time transforming their own reality (Leccardi and Feixa, 2012). Thus, the individual will adhere to what is expected from them in each situation but intentionally follow their individual strategic interests, allowing them to intervene in the structure and modify it. Nevertheless, young people do not constitute a homogeneous social group any more than adults do. Growing up is a gendered, classed and ‘raced’ experience, in which the outcomes are far from equal. As a consequence, in this paper, we follow a contextual approach that provides insight into how different groups of young people in Morocco are situated in their local contexts. Just as importantly, it offers the possibility of involving young people in comprehending the social practices in which they are engaged, including the institutionalised limits to collective and individual agency, and the potential to be a part of wider challenges to those social structures which perpetuate inequality and social injustice (White and Wyn, 1998).

The intersectional mechanism overlays the social identities of individuals who confirm privileged or unfavourable positions in the social structure, causing significant differences in life trajectories and transitional turning points, such as marriage in the Maghreb societies (Yuval-Davies, 2012). Thus, gender, social class, household, cultural capital and family capital (as a source of respectability, honesty, honour, etc.) determine the decisions of young Moroccans on their way to adulthood. The layering of these social conditions and identities confirms that social inequalities could be a matrix of domina-

tion defined as “vectors of oppression and privilege” (Creenshaw, 1993). On the other hand, the interest of the notion of youth agency may reflect two different approaches: the first considers youth as a potential danger to the social order, while the second considers young people as being social agents who are potentially involved in the processes of social and cultural innovation, and as producers and distributors who generate significant social benefits.

In the MENA region countries, the categorization of a person as ‘youth’ present blurred frontiers. As a Moroccan stakeholder remarks: “many countries have different definitions: for Morocco, it’s 18 to 30 years old; in Egypt, it’s 18 to 35, Bahrain, it’s 18 to 40. The definition depends on when *the person leaves home and becomes the head of household*. Thus, the householder becomes the person that has a statute in the society and therefore defining the youth is very complicated” (Moroccan social worker). It is a defined limit in of the starting point of the period but the decisive attribute for young men is to leave parental house and becomes head of their own household. In this situation, obtain a job is significative to acquire economic independence and financing the marriage (Singerman, 2007). Thus, the “youth issue” in the region is often articulated paradoxically as a problem and an opportunity. As a problem, it is related to security, anxiety about the increase of youth in an adult-centric society, unemployment, inequality, drug use, extremism and structural violence as victims and, sometimes, as perpetrators. As an opportunity, young people are perceived as a fountain of richness for the country, because of their work force capacity and of their will to migrate and to send back resources to their families.

The influence of social norms and conditions that govern social life constrained that youth does not transit the same way their life. Whatever the influence of social norms and conditions that govern social life, people of the same age do not similarly travel their life, there are significant variations in the timing and motives in which certain decisions are made. What are the main differences in the achievement of emancipation in MENA region among young people according their youth cultures?

3. Being young in Morocco

In the Moroccan context, hegemonic discourses about young people provoke stigmas that hinder their emancipation process especially over street minors and “deviant” ones. Being young in Morocco means managing a wide range of complex identities, trying to navigate social circumstances that impose identifications on young people themselves: peer recognition is often more important than parental recognition; the feeling of personal freedom coexists with the awareness of social control and the relationship with hegemonic discourses is diverse (Silver, 2007). However, the patterns and values of social institutions -religion, kinship, gender, political and economic structures- related to young people are not changing as fast and place young people in contradictory situations. On the one hand, Islam and the family form a discursive group and, on the other, consumption as an element of identity propitiated by the forms of neoliberal capitalism.

These two vital orientations constitute hegemonic, dominant and adult-centric ways of understanding the social category “young” that, on many occasions, expel them to the social margins (Sánchez-García and Sánchez-Montijano, 2018). These schemes are external and superior to everyday experience, they compose a guide for life and are characterized by ambiguity and polysemy (Schielke, 2015). These guides have two relational dimensions: with daily concerns and experiences and with other vital models. In short, they are guides that promise to give meaning and direction to individual and everyday experiences. In the MENA region, the family and Islam, on the one hand, and neoliberal capitalism on the other, develop together and influence each other, implying two sensitivities towards life: capitalism with an emphasis on success achieved through profit and

consumption, and the Islamic family focused on moral, future and “eternal” reward. However, the promises of both are transitory: that of capitalism is literally consumed by the difficulty of fulfillment for these young people in the face of economic shortages, and the awareness of future religious reward leaves individuals in the constant insecurity of achieving both objectives. As a consequence, the youth cultures that migrant minors and young people are building continually move between these often-contradictory worlds. (Sánchez-García, 2021).

In this context, as stated by the young people and minors interviewed in Tanger, two concepts are essential to understand the dialectic between marginalization and life expectancies among Moroccan youth groups: *hogra* and *karama*. *Hogra*, literally ‘humiliation’, refers to any situation in which one individual humiliates another for various reasons. These are social, family, economic, political, cultural, identity humiliations... The minors and young people interviewed highlight situations suffered in different social institutions and with different agents. Like when trying to sell tissues on a bus, a traveler mocked a young man and, slapping him, forced him to get off the bus. If these humiliations are common in Morocco for lower-class youth, for those who live on the streets they are aggravated due to their position in the social structure, which prevents them from carrying out their plans for the future, frustrating their emancipation and life plans. For many of these young people interviewed, these humiliations are caused by the *dorof*, their structural situation in the social system:

All of us who have a *dorof* of poverty have the idea of migrating; on the other hand, young people who have a stable economic situation have no reason to leave the country.” (Street Boy, 14 years old)

At this point it is important to remember that being young is a right that must be lived with a future perspective. Facing the social, educational, cultural home... minors and young people seek *karama*, literally ‘dignity’, to live their youth, but especially for develop their emancipatory life projects. At the same time, the changes in the structural conditions towards socioeconomic insecurity have a great impact on their aspirations, expectations and opportunities to plan future trajectories, creating various situations of disorientation and difficulty in solving their problems.

3.1 Tangier stories

Tangier, a border city in the north of Morocco and a meeting point between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean, has become in recent decades a transition zone towards Europe for both young Moroccans and sub-Saharan. Since the sixties of the twentieth century, there has been a strong wave of migrants from rural areas attracted by the industrial development of the city. In recent years, the development of infrastructure, real estate, tourism and industrial projects has inserted Tangier and its region into the flows of the globalized economy. The neoliberal policy that is being carried out by the Alaouite state in recent years aims to consolidate the attraction of international financial capital, Arab, European and North American economic actors, and migrant members of global classes, those groups of people who travel by the planet directing the global economy (Friedman, 2003) . Although this expansion generates greater economic growth and strong competitiveness in the international arena, the social cost in terms of spatial destructuring, as well as inequality and precarious working and housing conditions for the modest social strata remains high. In addition, as a consequence of the permanent permeability of the border with Europe, especially the departures and arrivals of migrants residing in European countries, Tangier is increasingly linked to transnational spaces (Al Harras, 2015).

In this context, we meet minors and young people who have the will to escape and build a life project. Expelled from Morocco due to the serious socioeconomic and political situation, they see no possibility of developing their lives in Moroccan territory. Thus, migrant youth and minors are subject to two dynamics that act at different levels, but converge at origin. The first is an intervention "from above" on migration, whose initiative comes from the rulers and from contemporary geopolitics, with a neoliberal vision that is very open to privatization and the call of international finance capital of the global classes. The second refers to a movement "from below", marked by economic transformations in the area and new opportunities in terms of investment, employment and exchange, as well as the transnational mobility of Moroccan migrants themselves, who across borders they create their own space of life, work, social and labor networks, their own transnational *wasta*. It is, for the most part, minors and young people who, in this migratory will, are unaware of the vital dimension of a change such as the one they seek in their lives, without knowing the context and meaning of starting this process.

In Tangier, we made contact with two groups of young people and minors in a street situation with whom we visited the places where they spend day and night. These are two differentiated groups, although with relationships between them. The first of them lives under the recently built bridges of Boulevard Mohammed VI, made up of minors and young girls between 12 and 21 years oldⁱⁱ. Despite living on the street, these young people maintain relationships with their families if they live in the city. This is the case of Amina, who has three brothers and remains in contact with her mother who lost her job in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta as a result of the pandemic, an example of the permeability of the border and the importance of entry and exit for the economy of the tangerine less favored classes. Her mother is aware of her daughter's situation, and is in favor of her emigrating, including financing the illegal trip (between 3,000 and 5,000 euros for boarding a boat for a journey of about 20 minutes to an Andalusian beach) because it would help her seek your happiness. However, the most controversial issue is that Amina prefers to live on the street rather than with her family, which has caused conflict with her mother. Another situation is that of Mariam who arrived in Tangier fleeing from her mother -abandoned by her husband- suffering conflicts and mistreatment, leaving the family home together with a brother and a sister, now pregnant: "I left home after a fight with my mother and we all left" (Mariam, 17 years old). Finally, Zeynab, a 21-year-old girl who has taken on the role of mother of the group, prepares food, cares for and protects them, but, at the same time, adopts bodily forms typical of masculinity, understood from a normative notion of gender, depending on the function that he adopts in the group, that is why he dresses like a boy, has his hair cut like a boy and adopts the forms of corporality and movement typical of boys in order to demonstrate strength and predisposition to use violence for protecting the group.

Another of the groups we came into contact with was made up of minors, girls and boys between the ages of 14 and 18 who live together in a plastic shack next to the railway wall that divides the city into two zones. When they arrive at their place of residence, they are eager to communicate their experiences, especially the needs they have. The group's reference educator is assaulted upon his arrival and overwhelmed by the needs of these children, many of them related to basic needs such as food, clothing and, above all, health care, which is why he always carries products in his backpack. disinfectants, anti-inflammatories, band-aids... This is the intervention in the street with these children, putting a band-aid where comprehensive interventions are needed to ensure their right to housing and education, but also to adequate food for their life stage, in ultimately, their right to full life. In addition, the physical degradation to which they are subjected by life on the street makes them pessimistic about the possibility of traveling to Spain, due to lack of family support, due to their mental and health

problems. Nur and Ahmed haven't been home for two years, they keep in touch with their mothers, but not with their fathers, with whom they have stopped talking. Tawfiq's parents are divorced and remarried, she has seven siblings. Half of her siblings live with her mother and the other half with her father. Two of her brothers are married, her mother works in a flea market in the center of Tangier near a mosque and sees her regularly, but her drug problems have expelled her from home for endangering the family honor with her behavior. For his part, Osama managed to enter Ceuta when he was twelve years old, wandering and living on the street without getting a place in the juvenile center. Finally, he decided to return because he was afraid, it was the first time that he had been separated from his mother. For him, returning to Morocco has been the worst decision of his life. Marwan does not keep in touch with his mother, but he talks to his father from time to time. With five siblings, only his mother works in a bakery, insufficient for the family's needs. For this reason, he would like to migrate, to be able to help his mother and achieve his frustrated emancipation in Tangier. These youngsters have developed a critical discourse about the family. In their opinion, his education was inadequate and they emphasize the importance of the peer group to gain life experience and develop his personality and social skills. In this regard, Marwan considers that:

friends can teach you positive things, because when you are in a strict family, trapped between four walls, and then you get out, you are free! You don't know what to do! But when you are in the world you come to learn what to do and what to avoid, you will also learn spontaneously with the people you go out with... some friends have taught me things that I had not received from my family. Prayer, for example. My parents haven't told me to pray since I was six years old.

4. Family and Emancipation

Family is a source of social capital as it is one of the basic pillars of North African society and key to achieve emancipation and adulthood. This means that family honor, respectability, or *wasta'* or *marifa'* connections are assets for young people to reach emancipation through marriage. All these attributes, which are related to education, employment and economic circumstances, make up the prestige and reputation of minors and young people as members of a family, the family also imposes *dorof* on its members. These conditions influence the possibilities and opportunities of young people and the development of their own capacities.

This importance for the social life of the young people of the kinship justifies that, during the conversations, seminars and collective interviews carried out, family relationships repeatedly appear as a significant element to understand motivations and, also, the form that the migratory process adopts. In some cases, encouraged by the families' own socioeconomic situation -for which we can speak of a family project- it represents a significant socioeconomic rise for the family. In other cases, motivated by the expulsion of the family itself due to situations related to vulnerabilities, lack of protection and, in some cases, mistreatment. In some way, it is the family that becomes the key element to understand the different realities of potential migrants, even determining the chances of success for the plan they intend to execute. Nevertheless, in both models, youngsters are looking a way to emancipate and follow their aspirations and motivations

A good example is Fatima, abandoned and mistreated by her husband, with seven children, is dedicated to selling flowers and paper tissues in the street; her purpose is that her children migrate, encouraging them and helping them as much as possible. That one of her children arrives in Europe would imply the improvement of her conditions in Tangier. In fact, to facilitate the trip, she moved from Taza (wilaya of Fez-Mequinez) to Tangier because her children ran away from home to go to the northern city and try to

migrate. In this way, she has prevented her children from ending up as street children, not without hardships such as suffering the drug addiction of one of her children. One of her children has been living in Melilla for two years. She got in five times since she was seven years old. The first time under a trailer, the second time hidden in the engine of a car and the last time it ended up sneaking through the military borders between Morocco and Melilla through a hole that few people knew about and of which the military had no knowledge. The fourth time he entered as a merchandise vendor with his brother, and the last time, swimming. She is happy because her son is in good condition. She now seeks to reach the peninsula and be able to take her mother and her brothers with her so that they can live in better living conditions. These desires to migrate are not limited to the boys, but their daughters also have that expectation because "they do not want to live in a country that sees how their mother and her brothers suffer every day" (Fatima, mother, 48 years old).

Seen from the outside, from a contemporary point of view, the family can be thought as a model of a 'totalitarian' group, a pressure group, but it is also an environment of education, support and reinforcement. The young people of Tangier show a strong attachment to the family (both for good and bad experiences), which continues to be their emotional and social point of reference and their economic support, in the absence of the state and a national social service support system. When family fails joint with economic precarity and deviant attitudes according to dominant discourses in MENA region, the process of transition to adulthood and emancipation is almost impossible. The solution is trying to cross to Europe to achieve their life plans and aspirations.

5. Conclusions

In a context marked by adult-centric control of young people's lives mainly through the family pillar, which makes it difficult to plan their own lives, the transition to adulthood and emancipation is not it exclusively in the hands of young people to achieve their motivations and aspirations. From the perspective of young people, the family remains a point of reference and support – in the absence of a state's support system - and the source of most respectable and respected values: a highway to adulthood. Young people think that the family, to a greater or lesser extent, continues to provide adequate education and the good path towards emancipation. This unites "respect for others", a recurring theme in most conversations, with "cleanliness": being a clean person, that is, honest, understanding this value from a religious perspective. The family also provides a secure anchor and supportive environment for its "respectable" young people.

In the current situation, while some young people are experimenting with new perspectives on what adulthood should "mean" in terms of space and personal autonomy, others prefer the idea of completing their transition quickly according to the dominant life stages and other cannot achieve any kind of emancipation living in the streets. In both cases, however, the central theme is choice: choosing to participate in the traditional family unit, and/or choosing a more individualistic worldview centered on independence and the right to define a life plan. Economic constraints, particularly in marriage, remove the element of choice and leave young people of all persuasions in the hands of their parents and family. In general, young people who adhere to figurative cultures have an easier path to emancipation than young people who try to follow a pre-figurative orientation in their decisions. Consequently, reaching adulthood and social maturity depends on the performative agency of individuals. But young people find themselves in a framework of agency limited by social constraints: a "bounded agency" (Evans, 2007). It is an agency influenced but not determined by the context in which the subjects find themselves, which has internalized frames of reference, as well as by the facts or actions of the environment that influence their own life experience. Finally, another characteristic of the transition to adult life is the temporary extension. For a large

mass of young people, definitive independence is postponed along with the assumption of traditionally defined adult roles.

In short, youngsters in MENA region are simultaneously trapped in structural realities marked by poor education, unemployment, and failure to form their own family, as well as constrained by cultural realities of societies that are quick to judge many of their attitudes and practices as "deviant" imposing barriers to young aspirations. Regardless of their class, gender, ethnic or religious background, many young people cannot afford to start families and homes. Furthermore, they cannot be fully independent and participate in the privileges and responsibilities of social adulthood associated with marital status. Even if they have become financially independent, the transition to adulthood is not complete until the marriage is effective. In addition, the social limitations for young people to achieve autonomy or personal emancipation mean that the traditional markers of that emancipation in Europe, such as economic independence or life in solitude, are not significant variables to measure the transition of Arab youth to the adulthood.

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ⁱ For more information on the survey: <https://zenodo.org/record/5751501#.YsK2dOxBy3J>

ⁱⁱ All the names used in the text are pseudonyms to preserve the confidentiality.