Research Statement

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Two broad yet interrelated research questions drive my research agenda:

- First, what is the impact of discriminatory legal codes on violence against women (VAW) in Muslim-majority countries (MMCs) and how do feminist associations and intersectional approaches challenge and reform these codes?
- Second, when and how does increased gender equality positively affect democratization, good governance, and reduced corruption in MMCs?

These two overarching questions address critical aspects of gendered legal discrimination and the potential benefits of increased gender equality at the national and international levels.

My mixed-methods approach combines both qualitative and quantitative studies while recognizing the strengths and weaknesses and vastly different epistemological assumptions of each. On the qualitative side, I largely employ feminist methods, such as open-ended surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation coupled with extensive primary and secondary source data (largely in Arabic and French) to contextualize and triangulate on my findings. Likewise, I incorporate feminist theoretical understandings into my research, including intersectionality, standpoint theory, and grounded theory to inform my research designs. Consequently, inclusivity is a key component in my representative sampling as I incorporate civil society actors from across the political spectrum as well as key policymakers across political parties and members of the judiciary in Morocco and Tunisia in order to understand how and why the legal codes marginalize and discriminate against women and the impediments feminists face to changing these laws. In addition to the traditional intersections of gender with class, race, culture, ability, gender identity, sexuality, and other categories of privilege, I have also extended the intersectional approach to include marital status, particularly the social and legal marginalization of single mothers, divorcees, widows, and their children as well as activism on the part of the largely criminalized LGBTQ community.

In addition, I conduct cross-national quantitative studies analyzing the impact of women's personal, legal, socioeconomic, and political empowerment on democratization, quality of governance, and corruption in MMCs as well as attitudinal/cultural shifts across generations and genders with respect to gender roles. For these studies, I use the Quality of Governance (QoG) Databases as well as the combined World Values Surveys and Arab Barometer to nest my qualitative work in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt within the larger population of MMCs when analyzing trends in attitudinal (i.e. cultural) shifts. My research questions are theoretically driven, but have far-reaching policy implications, suggesting that women's collective *individual empowerment* and *legal equality* are necessary precursors to, and possibly drivers of, a potential *fourth wave* of democratization and good governance in MMCs.

I. My first research question responds to gaps in the literature regarding when states initiate progressive women-friendly reforms identified by Weldon and Htun in multiple articles. These authors posit the prominence of civil society, specifically autonomous feminist activism, as a necessary catalyst in progressive policy shifts (Weldon 2002, 2004; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005; Htun and Weldon 2012, 2013), particularly those that address VAW, which stems from unequal power relations (Weldon and Htun 2013: 231). Nevertheless, Weldon and Htun (2010) indicate, the relationship between law, policy, and gender relations is "crucial and understudied" (208). Furthermore, the determinates of gender equality policies in established democracies within the developed world may differ extensively from those in the developing world **(**Weldon and Htun 2010: 207).

Despite the fact that a 71-country survey conducted between 1975 and 2005 indicated that Morocco demonstrated the greatest ***change*** in reducing gender discrimination in the legal codes (Htun and Weldon 2011: 162), this finding represents *de jure* legislation and not the *de facto* **implementation and impact** of the reforms on legal discrimination and VAW in Moroccan society (Weldon and Htun 2013: 234). In order to investigate the actual implementation and impact of the laws, the role of feminist activism on progressive reforms, and the causal relationships underlying these changes, in-depth case studies are necessary.

My research:

-- provides empirical evidence of the strategies and techniques feminists employ to contest conservative religious interpretations and patriarchal cultural norms, such as shadow reports to the Human Right Council in Geneva, modeling appropriate state responses through civil society listening centers and violence shelters, the creation of templates for legal documents such as the shared property agreement or marriage contract, and "best practices" check-lists for hospitals and police when dealing with rape or domestic violence victims;
-- analyzes not just *de jure* laws but also the laws *de facto* implementation through appropriate public policies, oversight mechanisms, and the accountability of public servants; and
-- identifies legal discrimination, *legal loopholes* in the laws, and discriminatory application of indiscriminate laws and the consequences in women's lives.

My research also contributes to the public policy subfield by extending the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) as my theoretical model to analyze polarization and consensus-building in Morocco and Tunisia over issues which affect women's rights and gender equality. By using ACF, I systematically problematize the essentialist dichotomization of secular and Islamic activism to provide a more comprehensive, nuanced understanding of the heterogeneity and diffusion within these two purportedly opposing coalitions (Salime 2011). By analyzing the competing frameworks according to ACF's coalitional core, policy core, and secondary beliefs, I identify issues and contexts in which the two poles actually converge and potentially cooperate. Although ACF is a deductive approach with observations drawn from a generalized theory, I find its structuring of core, policy core, and secondary beliefs useful as a means of organizing observations into new inductive theoretical trajectories. Furthermore, while ACF was used previously to apply feminist ideas to domestic violence policy change (Abrar et al 2000), ACF has not been applied in MMCs or to the issue of polarization between secular and religious associations. **(Feather, Ginger. (2014). "Competing Frameworks: Feminists Differ over Best Path to Moroccan Women's Rights." *Journal of Women and Human Rights in the Middle East.* (http://bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/224dfe9a/WHR-pub-Journal-Issue2-061614.pdf))**

I have subsequently extended this research in the following directions:

A. I analyzed the influence of Moroccan feminist scholar Fatema Mernissi, who promoted an emancipatory feminist discourse from within an Islamic reference in her activism and advocacy. **(Feather, Ginger. (2017). "An Emancipatory Feminist Discourse within an Islamic Reference: Mernissi's Legacy in Praxis." chapter in *Defaulting Boundaries of Islamic Feminism: The Dialogics of Difference in Fatema Mernissi's Writings.* Rabat: International University of Rabat.)**

B. I investigated the grassroots advocacy of Najia Adib, who broke the taboo against speaking of pedophilia to raise public awareness of the customary practices and legal institutions, which facilitate and exacerbate this crime against children. In addition, I demonstrate how the strengthening of European laws and punishments for those who profit from or exploit sex workers or engage in pedophilia represented a systemic change at the international level in the cost-benefit

analysis of sexual predators, who migrated south to Morocco, where laws are less strict. **(Feather, Ginger. (2018). "Najia Adib: A One-Woman Campaign Against Pedophilia in Morocco." chapter in *Women Rising: Resistance, Revolution, and Reform in the Arab Spring and Beyond* edited by Rita Stephan and Mounira Charrad. New York: New York University Press.)**

C. In 2016-2017 I was selected to conduct the Moroccan case study for a research-based advocacy project by Women's Learning Partnership to analyze the impact of legal discrimination on VAW across 11-countries. The project was under the direction of former UN VAW Rapporteur Yakin Erturk, culminating in a global civil society campaign with UN Women's support to challenge discrimination in Family Laws. **(Feather, Ginger (2017). "Moroccan Case Study: The Impact of Discriminatory Legal Codes undergirded by Patriarchal Cultural Norms, and Conservative Religious Interpretations on VAW in Morocco." Policy Brief for Upcoming Global Campaign to Reform Discriminatory Family Codes.)**

D. I am currently completing my first book project based on my seven years of interviews in Morocco and Tunisia which for the first time extends the intersectional approach to the interaction of *marital status* with gender and class on women's legal marginalization. This book probes the disproportionate problems faced by widows, divorcees, single mothers, and their children who fall outside of Morocco's family-centric legal framework and work by feminists to harmonize national laws and public policies with international human rights commitments.

II. My second research question, regarding the impact of women's empowerment and gender equality on measures of good governance, democratization, and reduced corruption, is a reversal of the paradigm that "democratization is good for women." This notion, I argue, was discredited among MMCs following the Arab Spring when perhaps the first truly democratic elections took place in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt bringing "moderate" Islamic parties to power. This *fourth wave democratization* brought more conservative political figures into leadership and represented a setback for women in these countries as anticipated by earlier scholarship (Htun and Weldon 2010: 213). Instead, *I* reverse the causal arrow to posit that women's empowerment and gender equality must develop simultaneously and in a *co-constitutive* relationship with democratization in order for women and their unique contribution to democratization to be realized. I have vetted my research at the following fora, which will culminate in a stand-alone book project.

A. I explored this hypothesis by focusing on quantitative analysis of the six former Soviet MMCs, which include the five Central Asian states and Azerbaijan, in relationship to other Muslim-majority regions. Among these six countries, I observe very high-levels of women's socioeconomic and political empowerment, in fact, the highest in the Muslim world. Nevertheless, these high levels of women's empowerment did not segue into democratization, good governance, or reduced corruption; in fact, just the opposite. The former Soviet MMCs are ranked the lowest in terms of democracy, good governance, and lower corruption. Why? I analyzed the nature of women's empowerment in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan through secondary-source analysis, which showed the post-Communist MMCs had extremely high levels of literacy and primary and secondary education, nearly universal employment of both men and women, and women's political representation accounting for nearly half of all regional leadership positions. Nevertheless, these advances came from the top-down. My assertion is that top-down empowerment is not enough. Instead, women's empowerment must be coupled with strong women's associational activism operating autonomously outside the state apparatus to facilitate bottom-up democratic inclusivity and accountability. **(Received a Scholarship to *Gender and Good Governance Workshop in Berlin*, Germany in 2014 to present my research.)**

B. Following the Arab Spring and rise of Islamic parties in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, democratization even appeared to pose a direct threat to women's advancement as Egypt rescinded its gender quota, the Moroccan parliament discussed lowering the marriage age for women back to 16, and Tunisian parliamentarians spoke openly about *complementary gender roles* instead of *gender equality*. Consequently, feminist activists adopted new priorities, discourses, and strategies as they repositioned themselves vis-à-vis the Islamic state. I explored this mobilization through interviews with women's associations in Morocco and Tunisia in 2014 and 2015 **(Presented at *Gender and Politics Conference* in Sweden in 2015** and **The Unfinished Project of the Arab Spring in Canada 2015)**

C. With these two projects, I grew to understand that women's empowerment is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition for a democratic transition. From these observations, I hypothesized that women's civil society activism and bottom-up empowerment are necessary precursors to and facilitators of democratic governance, mitigating the democratization process and quality of governance. My preliminary quantitative analysis seemed to corroborate this assessment, however, the strength and weakness of quantitative analysis used alone is its ability to demonstrate *correlation* and probability rather than *causation*. From this point, I conducted in-depth interviews with Moroccan and Tunisian women's associations, women's rights lawyers, parliamentarians, and cabinet ministers to identify the *causal mechanisms* linking increases in women's individual and collective empowerment to higher quality of governance. The interviews revealed the impact of legal discrimination on women's ability to *exercise their empowerment in other spheres*; unfortunately, no adequate database exists to measure *legal empowerment* at the cross-national level. Subsequently, I began developing a database utilizing my knowledge of the constitutions, family laws, and penal codes in different MMCs, which is another key contribution of my research program, the extension of women's empowerment to measures of *personal and legal empowerment*. Adding women's personal and legal empowerment as potential *intervening variables*, either mediating or moderating democratization and quality of governance, illuminates potentially gendered structural, cultural, and systemic factors underlying the so-called democratic deficit in MMCs. **(Scholarship to the *Quality of Governance Conference on Gender and Corruption*, Sweden 2016)**

D. My most recent project hypothesizes that women's empowerment and increased gender equality at the individual, legal, socioeconomic, and political levels democratizes the family by altering traditional patriarchal power hierarchies. This project analyzes the impact of these shifting power relations within the nuclear family and in public space on *attitudinal (i.e. cultural, change)* regarding issues of gender equality among MMCs. For this, I used World Values Surveys and Arab Barometer data and time-series analysis to assess changing attitudes towards gender equality and democratic governance, broken down by gender and age. The preliminary evidence indicates that *attitudinal* or *cultural change* towards gender equality and democracy can largely be broken down in predictable ways based on gender and age, but critical junctures such as economic or political crises may alter the general predictability. (**Feather, Ginger. (forthcoming/2018). "Gender Equality and Democratization of the Muslim Nuclear Family: Attitudinal/Cultural Change based on Gender and Generation." chapter in *An Age of Uncertainty: The Double Edged Politics of Empowerment and Sidelining Women in the MENA Region*. Edited by Drude Dahlerop and Hanane Darhour. New York: Palgrave MacMillan Publishers.)**

In addition to my two main lines of research, I also collaborate with colleagues in Morocco and other MENA countries by contributing to and/or editing book projects and journal articles, which may not make the SSCI, but potentially have greater local/policy impact.