

## **Marieme Hélie-Lucas Oral History Content Summary**

### **Track 1 [duration: 1:10:05] [Session one: 7 July 2015]**

[00:00] Marieme Hélie-Lucas [MHL] Describes ‘feminist lineage’ and liberation struggle in Algeria as foundations. Born 1939, Algiers, Algeria. Describes upbringing by four women of different generations, never meeting biological father. Mentions mother’s divorce from violent man during pregnancy. Discusses common perceptions of fatherhood as psychotherapist, differentiating between biological parent and parent. Describes mother’s support from sister, mother and grandmother. Acknowledges being born into family of feminists as most important aspect of life. Compares to own experience of single motherhood, raising four children alone ‘in true sense of word’. Comments on loss of trans-generational solidarity in today’s society, disputing feminist belief that breaking from extended family liberating. Mentions viewpoint of friends from United States of America (USA).

[05:08] Mother as first woman to divorce in family and immediate society. Describes great-grandmother as first feminist in lineage, managing business and six children following death of husband. Describes grandmother, born late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Mentions school compulsory in colonial Algeria, describing as free and secular. Story about grandmother being removed from school at critical moment in education, to help at home, raising youngest sibling, never forgiving parents and refusal to allow family influence on own daughters when widowed, instead taking menial jobs.

[10:00] Continues story about grandmother, now working as office runner in customs office, pursuit of study, achieving qualification as customs inspector. Describes grandmother emphasising importance of economic independence to MHL’s mother and aunt. Remarks on mother’s feminist rebellion expressed in choice of unsuitable husband and then celibacy, observing that probably wanted child. Mother and aunt French Literature teachers, comments that many teachers in environment unwed, equating education and economic independence with lack of need for man. Describes intellectual atmosphere at home, open table with large numbers of friends, including single men. Describes mother’s involvement in campaign for women’s right to vote, gained 1945, and promoting equality in Algeria.

[15:10] Describes taking education, economic independence, ability to choose husband/remain celibate, right to political work, for granted. Describes sexual liberation as ‘served on a plate’ by mother, embracing 16 year-old MHL’s relationship in 1950s society, sense of empowerment by feminist meaning imbued. Describes hating school, mother’s determination ensuring Baccalaureate. Describes access to mother’s library of French literature, aged 10, reading all by age 14. Study of Philosophy, then Sociology, then Psychology, University of Algiers, Algeria. Mentions Karl Marx.

[20:00] Describes cheating system by studying subjects simultaneously. Describes intellectual freedom, MHL attending classes of interest not others. Student of Pierre Bordieu and Jeanne Favret Saada. Mentions Matheron, Collège de France, Paris, France. Describes meeting husband age 16 as activist in Algerian liberation struggle,

acknowledges as first political mentor, remarking that as influential to MHL's life as feminist lineage. Discusses generational acquirements as feminists, recognizing political activism as gain of MHL's generation from mother's generation. Mentions daughter. Remarks that politics and knowledge can be taught by example. Describes reading Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, introducing Doris Lessing's writing to mother. Describes wedding aged 19, as quick signature wearing black dress, groom in jeans, on motorbike.

[25:00] Mentions living together at mother's. Describes difficult climate in Algiers, meeting husband at Battle of Algiers. Growing threats, living in student hostel with first child, friend killed. Describes fleeing to Morocco as refugees, period of great learning used throughout life. Describes exertion of power and control by National Liberation Front (FLN) and young militia Story about driving incident. Mentions Kalashnikovs, Rabat, Kénitra, Morocco.

[30:30] Decision to leave Morocco, move to London, England, attending London School of Economics (LSE). Describes difficulty of finding accommodation with toddler, so living with immigrants, people arriving from Cyprus and India. Describes hardship as students, lack of food. Describes lifelong fight against fascist types encountered in Morocco. Mentions idea of think tank to discuss concept of university in an independent Algeria. Describes sister in law's home in Morocco as refuge for Algerian freedom fighters, witnessing their post-traumatic stress. Remarks that violence brutalizes entire society.

[36:02] Discusses impact of 1990s violence in Algeria on collective unconscious, damage to youth involved. Expresses relief that not asked to partake in violent acts during Algerian war-time activities. Discusses importance as feminists to reflect on revolutionary violence. Remarks that hands not clean if participate in any liberation movement. Comments on Algeria's elite's attempts to negotiate better rights with France, and final call to arms. Describes own participation as 'simple things teenagers asked to do'.

[40:00] Describes discomfort at feminist alliances with human rights organizations, referring to women who have killed men as final desperate measure. Discusses issue in political terms, ineffectiveness of theories on correct way to achieve liberation, giving Islamic State (IS) as example. Mentions Kalashnikov. Discusses conflict and need for revolutionary violence. Discusses complex relationship between class, race, ethnicity, sex, during liberation struggles, including feminist liberation movement, difficulty of prioritising, remarking that women's rights always come last. Discusses Muslim fundamentalism, as Muslim Far Right, non religious movement. Applies experience from Algerian liberation to observe danger of repetition regarding women's issues today.

[44:30] Describes secular intention of Algerian liberation movement, immediate prominence of religion, Islam made religion of state in first constitution, 1963, under Ahmed Ben Bella. Describes people's apathy, own blank vote. Mentions communist mantra. Reflects on mistakes of the time. Discusses importance of solidarity against borders to support movements, own sense of responsibility to give back. Describes

working on liberation struggles of South Africa, Portuguese colonies over ten years, experience of support from French, Swiss, Finns, Moroccans, Tunisians. Describes applying learning from experience to network founded, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). Remarks that international solidarity is another means of fighting racism, xenophobia and other causes of divide.

[50:00] Remarks that international solidarity should not give anyone right to make decisions on behalf of people concerned. Describes foreigners in Algeria shaping institutions after independence, leaving when things 'turned sour', defining MHL's belief, that international solidarity should not involve interference but support to serve goals of others. Describes as inspiration when setting rule for WLUML. Describes big debate in 1962 on naming of liberation army, attempts for more secular reflection than Mujaheddin. Describes struggles within army, start of troops controlling people on streets of Algiers, MHL's need to carry marriage certificate. Describes rape of unaccompanied women and girls by liberation army.

[55:00] Story about heroine of liberation struggle forced into marriage with unknown army man against will, having first suffered rape by French soldiers. Remarks on influence of conservatives using religion during liberation struggle, nobody confronting fate of numerous women. Describes slow change of French laws post independence. Describes adoption of post First World War French natalist law in Algeria. Story about counter-demand for contraception supported with *fatwa* by High Islamic Council, ignored by Ben Bella, resulting explosion in population, average 7.9 children per woman in procreative age, reaching fecundity at 20, 21 children. Gives definition of *fatwa* as an opinion not court ruling.

[1:00:20] Describes impact on plans for education of young women, fear of lumpen youth eventually allowing contraception, 1976, stating that clearest example of manipulating religion to justify political aims. Describes Algeria hosting first Pan-African Cultural Festival, Algiers, 1969. Mentions USA. Story about atmosphere of content and participation in city's squares in evening disrupted by men shouting for women to return home, and women obeying. Describes people's initiative of street film festival, MHL remarking that gained film education there. Mentions German expressionists, films of Soviet Revolution, visiting French filmmakers. Stopped by state, in the name of Islam.

[1:05:30] Contextualises all this background and experience as precursor for WLUML network. Describes background of Family Code in 1960s Algeria. Mentions law on Reproductive Rights. Describes fundamentalist deputies presenting first drafts in 1964, women losing all rights. Describes detail of law, including legalisation of polygamy, and required permission from male guardian to work. Mentions *Wali*, matrimonial tutor. Describes vibrant Left still in existence in Algeria, and opposing new law in Ben Bella's presidency. Describes continuation of fight during Houari Boumédiène's presidency, including demonstrations with women condemned to death by French tribunals during liberation struggle at front line. Final passing of Family Code, 1984, with success in one clause, regarding permission to work. Describes personal efforts in leadership circles, to question claims on the prophet's sayings.

Remarks that lost rights that enjoyed under colonization, step back for women, generation having fought for independence. [pause for break]

## **Track 2 [duration: 40:24] [Session one: 7 July 2015]**

[00:00] Story behind foundation of network Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), following successful international campaign for release of three Algerian women. Mentions Family Code, teaching at Algiers University, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands, Amnesty International, President of Algeria, Papua New Guinea, Sudan, Morocco, Iran, India, Shahnaz Shaikh.

[06:15] Remarks on innovation of Shaikh's action, linking rights denied by Family Law to those guaranteed by constitution, in Supreme Court, as example to follow. Describes teaching Epistemology in social sciences and nuances of subject, importance of ideology behind methodology.

[10:13] Elaboration on choice of name, focus on political and sociological reality of women, not minorities. Mentions Reproductive Rights in Algeria. Discusses disparity between laws in 'so-called Muslim' countries and communities. Mentions India, Bangladesh, Tunisia. Example of polygamy. Remarks on patriarchal nature of all laws labeled Muslim. Further differentiation between meanings and significance of use of singular and plural.

[16:05] Describes WLUML cohort. Mentions Farida Shaheed, Faizun Zakaria, Shirkat Gah, Muslim Women's Research and Action Front, Aisha Imam, Nawal El Saadawi. Discusses sources of 'Muslim' laws as religious interpretation, also cultural norms passed off as Islamic.

[20:41] Example of female genital mutilation (FGM), explains history from ancient Egypt. Story about introduction of FGM in Sri Lanka, 1990s, and Tunisia today. Mentions *Wali* matrimonial tutors in Tunisia. Describes introduction of FGM in Sandžak, Serbia, adult women taken to hospital bleeding. Describes initiative to expose activists to alternative Muslim contexts, to develop knowledge beneficial for own country scenarios.

[25:15] Describes support from Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE), Switzerland. Remarks that 'solidarity is not interference'. Describes detail of implementation, 'organizing a culture shock', analyses of situations, struggles and strategies in each place.

[30:18] Launch of publication, 'Dossier'. Compares Iran and Algeria, remarking on ability to state publicly at Algiers University that MHL an atheist. Discusses enrichment of local struggles through exchange of experiences, circumstance-led

strategies chosen by women on the ground. Gives examples from different countries. Mentions Iran, Sudan.

[34:14] Describes compromise of funders' interest in WLUML's initiative challenging interpretations of Islam, above other strategies, resulting in less funding for secular initiatives. Mentions Association of Women's Rights In Development (AWID). Discusses political implications, imposed religious identities. Remarks on growing number of women calling for secular states. Criticises human rights organisations for 'pushing representation of Muslims' instead of citizens of a country. Describes support from donors 'turning sour' because of emphasis on Islam.

### **Track 3 [duration: 48:23] [Session two: 8 July 2015]**

[00:00] Detail of WLUML's first Plan of Action, embracing wide range of women's issues, and diversity in Muslim world. Describes discovery of political trend among fundamentalist forces, in selecting 'worst practice' customs and Islamic interpretations, labeled Islamic and exported and enforced elsewhere as transnational movement. Relates to what is happening in Europe today, remarking that research would dismantle this ideology. Discusses example of female head of state, Bangladesh, Nigerian girls excluded, both 'Islam'. Discusses laws forbidding FGM in Serbia, not enforced in Muslim communities, recognition as culture in Europe.

[05:42] Mentions Jihadi groups working from country to country. Discusses Family Code in North Africa, Maliki school of thought, exported to Pakistan. Describes 3rd Algerian Infantry Division (DIA) importing Shia temporary marriage, from Iran. Mentions training of men in Peshawar, Pakistan, resulting in sexual slavery in Gaila camps, Algeria. Explains history of Muslim dress codes, from Africa, South Asia, Saudi Arabia. Remarks that culture and tradition eradicated in the name of Islam by extreme Right forces 'monopolising' religion. Mentions United Kingdom (UK), France.

[10:00] Describes organisation's exploration of diversity within Islam through country visits in exchange programme, second stage documenting laws. Describes in detail working on laws with Farida Shaheed, complexity of documentation. Remarks on danger of being confined to reinterpretation. Describes Women and Law as ten-year programme managed by activists as learning process, giving back knowledge produced. Results presented in handbook on family laws, 'Knowing Our Rights'. Describes same approach for 'Dossier'. Remarks on elitist nature of research published in academic journals, 'Dossier' read by women in India.

[15:40] Describes distribution system. Describes ad hoc structure for each programme, separate to network, graphically represented as spiral. Describes omitting local achievements by women in funding reports so ownership retained, and not assumed by organisation. Discusses positive impact. Describes fluid involvement of women depending on individual interests, working groups not permanent.

[20:00] Discusses impact of formats dictated by funders, remarking on number of feminists colluding. Gives example of resistance to funders by Women In Black,

Belgrade, Serbia and first women's court on war crimes in ex-Yugoslavia. Describes WLUMML's controversial policy on salaries and ideology behind it. Remarks on own financial poverty on minimum wage, impact on personal and family life. Discusses personal choice, and portrait of career feminism today, remarking on lack of necessary political reflection. Discusses political origins of feminist movement worldwide. Mentions civil rights movement, United States of America (USA), liberation struggles in North Africa, Africa. Discusses ramifications of lack of political background of young women today and need to address this. Describes own 'reverse path', in post independence Algeria, the few educated immediately taking important positions in office, MHL among four sociologists in country.

[30:00] Describes result of population settlement, Europeans leaving upon independence. Mentions first Algerian delegation to China, Mao Zedong (Chairman Mao) observing youth. Described enormity of responsibility, MHL remaining in post for three years. Remarks that consciously went down social ladder, as activist choice, 'against stream of feminism everywhere'. Reflects on 20 years of WLUMML as happy period of life, experiencing sisterhood. Describes organisation's lack of focus on the West, remarking on change in recent history, support of fundamentalists by Western countries demanding shift in focus. Mentions Latin America, Australia, Northern Europe, USA. Discusses political analysis made by countries with European perspective. Describes attempts to engage with human rights organisations and the Left, on events in Europe as replication of those in other countries.

[35:05] Detailed discussion of events in Algeria, 1990s, 1960s. Mentions Muslim Brotherhood, Algerian Hamas, Jean Sénac, population policy, lumpen youth.

[40:25] Discusses impact of history and start of political change in Algeria, first party organised, Islamic Salvation Front (now Muslim Brotherhood), elections in hands of fundamentalists. Describes women's organisations and women's unions taking to the streets. Discusses western view of fundamentalists as victims, blaming media for perspective gained by human rights organisations, progressive people, the Left, in name of tolerance towards Islam, anti-imperialism. Remarks that fundamentalists extreme Right political force, not a religious movement, not interested in theology or debate, in Algeria known as Green Fascists, or Islamafascists. Discusses historian view of use of fascist label. Mentions Aryan race, Ancient Rome, *Untermensch*, Nazis, *Kafir*, Jews, communists.

[45:00] Describes interest in comparison with Fascism and Nazism, MHL viewing ideologies as one with today's fundamentalists. Refers to Nazi slogan, 'The church, the kitchen and the cradle' church replaced with mosque. Refers to fundamentalist recognition of social justice through charity, admonishing Left for supporting. Mentions appeals to human rights organisations for support. Mentions Amnesty International, Cageprisoners, Moazzam Begg. Discusses misunderstanding of fundamentalist stance as anti-imperialist. Mentions USA, Saudi Arabia, Qatar. Describes visit to the Balkans for Women's Court on war crimes in ex-Yugoslavia, experience of fundamentalist commentary in Bosnia on 'Arabs' and Gulf states nationals. [pause for break]

#### **Track 4 [duration: 40:55] [Session two: 8 July 2015]**

[00:00] Describes attack on women hairdressers, beauty salon workers, women who took their children to school, killed alongside Left intellectuals, comparing 1990s Algeria to events in France today. Mentions GIA, Islamic Salvation Army (AIS). Explains strategy of groups, no way out for women. Describes involvement of women, first on scene to support and investigate after massacres.

[05:05] Describes futile communication with human rights organisations. Mentions Amnesty International, Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), Human Rights Watch (HRW). Story about dismissal of founding members of Amnesty International Algiers, after writing to Peter Sane at Headquarters to explain situation in country. Remarks that human rights organisations not apolitical. Mentions Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), Amnesty International Sweden, Amnesty International France.

[10:00] Describes helping HRW on three missions to Algeria, and disparity of outcome. Story of MHL confronting HRW in Washington D.C. Describes reform of Family Law under fundamentalists, indoctrination of children, comparing to Nazi Germany. Describes current targets in France of law, education, sex segregation, comparing to fundamentalist activity in 1970s and 1980s Algeria. Describes education system in France, comparing to UK.

[15:00] Reference to 1905 Law of Separation of Church and State, France revised by Nicolas Sarkozy, remarking on misguided understanding today that law is against veil. Discusses veiling of children in context of male sexuality. Mentions Chahdortt Djavann's 'Bas Les Voiles!'. Discusses impact on school curriculum. Mentions Darwinism, evolutionism.

[20:15] Discusses so-called Muslim laws in France, differentiating between citizens of one country. Discusses Catholic opposition to contraception and abortion but freedom of choice in practice. Remarks on clarity regarding Catholics, becoming blurred when it comes to so-called Muslims'. Comments that laws should give rights, without forcing use of those rights by individuals. Example of controversial case of marriage annulment in French court.

[20:15] Another case involving Ramadan. Mentions Saudi Arabia, Iran, Algeria, Pakistan. Discusses physical attacks on journalists in France. Mentions Maison de Presse. Story of Algerian playwright, 'À mon âge, je me cache encore pour fumer' set fire to on street. Discusses impact of events on MHL personally, importance of vocalising condemnation, walking fine line with racism in France. Mentions publication, 'Women Against Fundamentalism: Stories of Dissent and Solidarity'. Explains assertions regarding concepts used routinely by intellectuals, media shaping opinions on issues relating to fundamentalism. Discusses parallel legal system of Sharia courts in UK, denying women common law rights.

[30:00] Explains lack of ethnic or religious statistics in France as post-World War II measure. Refers to extermination camps. Describes survey in France revealing quarter of Muslims atheists, similar among Catholics, number practicing at 5 per cent, 85 per

cent in support of secular schools. Discusses further stark statistics, unemployment among youth of migrant descent. Criticizes Left and feminist abandoning fight by political and social means, instead using religion. Discusses true meaning of term Sharia. Refers to Women and Law programme proving that no one corpus of laws applied in Muslim world.

[35:45] Describes work promoting secularism. Remarks that issue of Sharia law critical and will spread unless feminists confront now. Refers to attempts in Canada to pass law enabling religious tribunals to settle family affairs. Story about MHL's successful pursuit of case activated by Southall Black Sisters, collecting parallel cases under various Muslim laws from network in different countries. Discusses misuse of language, with terms, Sharia, Islamophobia. Discusses 7 July 2005 London bombings, shooting of Brazilian civilian Jean Charles de Menezes by Metropolitan Police as example of racism not Islamophobia.

[40:00] Remarks that all-male conservative group defining Islam, progressive young women never involved. Discuss term Jihad, maintaining that meaning fed by fundamentalists, fascists. [pause for break]

#### **Track 5 [duration: 20:33] [Session two: 8 July 2015].**

[00:00] Additional comment on attacks in France, remarking that broad categories of people will be attacked. Mentions attacks on 'Charlie Hebdo' and Jewish community. Discusses obstacles encountered over the years, plurality of strategies. Compares women in Sudan, Algeria, Pakistan. Discusses support of activists' families. Mentions WLUML publication, 'Our Great Ancestors' documenting women promoting feminist agenda from sixth century.

[05:00] Describes threats received by activists, necessitating temporary move to other countries. Describes systems and strategies in place to enable contingency plans.

[06:15] Describes attendance at United Nations conferences, sabotage of space. Describes collusion between Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt and the Vatican on Reproductive Rights. Describes contingents of women from Iran 'cordoned by bearded men', representing Islam. Describes organising round tables on rise of fundamentalism with speakers of all faiths. Describes conference, Religious Right, Secularism and Civil Rights, London, UK, 2014 organised with One Law For All and Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain. Describes attendance from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Algeria, Senegal, exiled Iranians. Talks about Soheib Bencheikh, Great Mufti of Marseille, France. Mentions book, 'Marianne et le Prophète: L'Islam dans la France laïque'. Discussion on history of women covering for differentiation from slaves, promotion of education as bringing respect to women, not veil, analogy of school as modern day veil.

[15:48] Discusses life as a mother.

[17:41] Reflects on achievements, acknowledging mother for freedom of independent mind. Reflects on choices made.



