



Arab  
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Initiative

*Research Paper*

# #KOUSINTEK: WHEN FOOTBALL EXPOSES GENDER INEQUALITIES

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## About the Author

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Cover photo: Moroccan fans cheer during 2022 Women's Africa Cup of Nations final match between Morocco and South Africa at Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat, Morocco - July 2022. © Jalal Morchidi/AA.

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## 1 #Kousintek: When Football Exposes Gender Inequalities

The Moroccan public space, in the Habermasian sense<sup>1</sup> of reflecting the degree of political freedom enjoyed by citizens, remains heavily influenced by men or created primarily for their benefit. Whether physical, political, media, or digital, public spaces serve as a platform for individuals to express themselves, make claims, voice their demands, and engage in protests. Consequently, restricting women's access to such spaces undermines their pursuit of equal citizenship and curtails their ability to exercise fully their rights and freedoms.

Achieving women's equal access to public space is often linked to their ability to enjoy political, economic, and social rights, particularly in relation to political decision-making and economic resources.<sup>2</sup> However, true equality must encompass the expansive and unencumbered spaces that enable individuals and groups to voice their opinions, challenge authority, and make demands, regardless of whether these demands are temporary, local, or national in scope. In this regard, the spaces occupied by sports supporters are a particularly interesting area for further examination.

This study offers a critical analysis of women's presence in public space in Morocco, using the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar as a lens for examination, while acknowledging the sporting event's context. During the Moroccan national team's matches, the media widely broadcasted images from Qatari stadiums, as well as celebrations in Moroccan cities' main squares following the team's victories, which were lauded for their unprecedented female participation. However, this visibility begs the question of who is excluded and remains invisible and highlights the need to prioritize equal access (including spatial, economic, social, and gender) to public spaces, particularly those associated with sports activities. This fundamental demand sheds light on the significant spatial, social, and gender disparities that persist in Morocco beyond the small number of women in the spotlight.

This paper centers on three core concepts. Firstly, it seeks to investigate the interplay between sports supporterism, access to public space and freedom, and new forms of protest and public demands, with a focus on the exclusion of women from spaces for citizen participation. Secondly, it uses the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar as a case study to illustrate the portrayal of Moroccan women in stadiums

and gender-mixed public spaces, such as cafés, streets, and football fan zones, despite their underrepresentation in these spaces. The paper will analyze the inequalities that this representation has paradoxically revealed through a netnographic survey<sup>3</sup> conducted on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Finally, this study will explore the connection between this global sporting event and the emergence of a new form of protest and demand for equal access to public space in all its dimensions (physical, virtual, and political), including the cafe space and the use of the derogatory term #kousintek, which orders women back to the kitchen.

## “Supporterism” and the Rise of Protest Expression

To effectively study supporterism in Morocco, it is necessary to differentiate between organized and unorganized football supporters. Organized supporterism is carried out by the “Ultras” football fan groups, while unorganized groups are made up of simple occasional supporters who form the larger audience for a club or team<sup>4</sup> and are linked to the spatial and temporal context of a sporting event. It is also important to distinguish between club supporters in the league (national championship) and those of the national team, which is generally limited in time and less accessible to all supporters. However, the study of supporterism in Morocco has primarily focused on Ultras, their organization, violence,<sup>5</sup> and recent

<sup>3</sup> Netnography is a qualitative approach used to analyze virtual communities, which draws inspiration from the ethnographic method and involves non-participant observation of the community members. For a detailed understanding of this method, refer to the work of Nada Sayarh (2022). “Netnography: Application of a Method for Investigating Virtual Communities with Relevance for the Study of Sensitive Topics.” *Recherches qualitatives*, 32(2), 227-251.

<sup>4</sup> William Nuytens. (2004). *The Popularity of Football: Sociology of Supporters in Lens and Lille*. Artois University Press.

<sup>5</sup> See in particular the work of Abderrahim Bourkia. (2018), *Des ultras dans la ville: étude sociologique sur un aspect de la violence urbaine*, Crossroads edition; Zakaria Lahrache (2021), *La perception de la violence dans les stades de football chez les spectateurs marocains Cas des supporters du RCA et du WAC de Casablanca*, doctoral thesis, Burgundy Franche-Comte; Abderrahim Rharib, *Les dérives du supportérisme au Maroc*. In: *Les enjeux du développement économique, financier et écologique dans une mondial-*

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Intolerance and Discrimination”, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2003, Pages 2–12.

<sup>2</sup> These spaces impose certain invisible limits on women's participation, particularly with regard to political affiliation, belonging to associations, intellectual levels, organization, etc., which makes them elitist or context-bound!

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protest actions, with limited attention given to other forms of supporterism.

While the focus of this article is not on the organized supporterism of the Ultras, it is important to provide some context on the origins and evolution of their protest actions. The Ultras emerged in 2005 among supporters of the two major football clubs, Raja and Wydad Casablanca, and have since spread throughout Morocco.<sup>6</sup> The Ultras are known for creating an electrifying atmosphere in the stands through crowd waves,<sup>7</sup> tifos shows<sup>8</sup>, songs, drum rolls, and banners. In 2011, the Ultras Askary du Far<sup>9</sup> took part in the democratic springuprisings, chanting anti-Makhzen chants in the streets.<sup>10</sup> The Wydad Athletic Club Ultras (known as the Winners) in 2012 used the spring slogans to demand the departure of the president of their club, Abdelilah Akram, through tagging the streets of Casablanca with the phrase “Akram Erhal! (Akram Leave!).” This protest was not just against the president’s poor governance but also against turning the last element of entertainment for the youth of Casablanca into a means of doing business and political maneuvering. The Eagles group of the Ultras Green Boys of Raja composed and sang the song “*F’Bladi delmoni*” (Wronged in my Own Country) in 2017, which many researchers believe accelerated the

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sation risquée. (pp. 501-512), Poznań University of Economics and Business Press.

6 The Green Boys from Raja, the Winners from Wac, the Askary Ultras of Far, the Helala Boys of Kenitra; the Matadores from Tetouan; the Hercules from Tangier; the Imazighen of Agadir; the Shark Ultras of Safi.

7 In the stadiums, there are differences between the side stands equipped to receive crowds of supporters, and the ends (the *curvas*) and sections located behind the goals, which are typically reserved for the Ultras. “[...] Sections open to the wind, sun and rain, with rudimentary stands where the bodies of spectators merge, especially if they stand up to better cheer for their teams.” Bromberger, Christian. *La répartition des spectateurs : au-delà du prix des places, des territoires*. In: *Le match de football : Ethnologie d’une passion partisane à Marseille, Naples et Turin*, Paris, published by *la Maison des sciences de l’homme*, 1995

8 A tifo is a choreographed visual display generally organized by supporters of a team, dubbed in certain countries “tifosi” or “aficionados.” It takes place in the stands of a stadium or arena hosting a sporting event.

9 Club of the Royal Armed Forces, team of the city of Rabat. See Badr Kidiss “In Morocco, Ultras Give Voice to a Disillusioned Youth.” Konbini, 26 October 2018, <https://www.konbini.com/sports/maroc-ultras-jeunesse-des-abusee/>

10 As explained in other writings, we opt for the name “democratic spring” (instead of Arab spring) which respects the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the citizens of Morocco, in particular that of the Amazighs.

pace of Ultras’ protests.<sup>11</sup> The Ultras have been increasingly considered as carrying the voice of the people. This song is accompanied by flares at the stadium<sup>12</sup> and painted tags reproduced by supporters everywhere in the cities of Morocco, on walls, in classrooms, street benches, and school desks. Other songs followed, echoing the socio-economic and political protest of the Ultras Green Boys. Thus, the “winners” were singing “Free and Defiant” and “*lqalb hzeen*” (The Heart is Sad) in 2019, while the Hercules of Tangier composed “*Blad lhogra*” (Country of Oppression) that same year.

## Women Rejected from Public Supporter Spaces

Although this dynamic has taken on a popular character, women are the main absentees<sup>13</sup> from ultras groups that occupy the interior of the stadiums with songs and tifos,<sup>14</sup> and appropriate the outside of these stadiums with Ultras “tags” and graffiti. The Ultras remain exclusively male-dominated structures and their slogans are conjugated in the masculine form. The use of feminine imagery in Ultras graffiti serves no other purpose than to diminish and insult their opponents, as evidenced in the example below:

Despite increased visibility for women in stadiums in recent years, their image in stadiums remains similar to their image in politics. Women in these spaces are often negatively perceived because they occupy a space socially and culturally reserved for men. They are often viewed as failing in their primary responsibilities to their homes and families, while also seen as mere ornament adding a touch of modernity to the stadium. Supporters of several football clubs have

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11 Abderrahim Bourkia, “Football Stadiums: A New Political Arena”, Albayane, 2019.

12 The arbitrary burning of stands which is sometimes accompanied by smoke bombs.

13 It should be noted that there is an exception in this context: the death of a young girl, Hayat Belkacem, on 25 September 2018, by bullets from the Moroccan Navy, while she was making an illegal crossing to Europe on the Mediterranean Sea. This tragic event aroused great emotion and the Matadores of Tetouan attended the match wearing black jerseys – then committed acts of vandalism!

14 Here again, the ultra groups show a certain ingenuity, sometimes thought-out and sophisticated, drawing inspiration from great masterpieces, in particular from *Game of Thrones*, from George Orwell’s *Room 101*, or from *The Bald Soprano* by Eugène Ionesco.

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A Raja Green Boys graffiti on the outskirts of Casablanca shows two sexist representations. The Duck symbol of the feminized Wydad opponent team is portrayed in a seductive pose, and the number 9 is accompanied by an arrow pointing to the top right, a symbol of virility. In contrast, the date 1937, representing the creation of the Wydad team, is shown in red, and the number 9 is written with an arrow pointing down, a symbol of femininity. **Photo credit © Taoufik Saadou**

attempted to create women’s sections of the Ultras, citing that the women are as involved as their “brothers” with club activities. In 2005, the Green Girls Ultras was created to disappear only a few years later. After failing to be accepted and hosted on the official website of the Ultras Green Boys, the women’s section created its own blog spaces (on 26 May 2005) and Facebook<sup>15</sup> with their logos and layout.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, these initiatives have not been successful, as many internet users consider affiliation with Ultras groups to be exclusive to men. The issue of sexism towards women in Ultras is still prevalent, as demonstrated by the Ultras Winners clash that is still circulating on TikTok.<sup>17</sup> Until today, young women who declare themselves as members of Ultras on social media continue to face backlash and insults.



Green Girls press release was published in the newspapers in 2007. The image is taken from the Green girls’ blog, posted on 5 May 2007

15 <https://magana.skyrock.com/1040950804-green-girls.html>; <https://green-girls01.skyrock.com/729333086-Banderole-Green-Girls.html>; <https://nabil860.skyrock.com/729542949-Green-girl.html>

16 “We are a group of Ultras supporters launched in 2005 after our dear brothers the Green Boys. We are a group of friends, fans of Raja of Casablanca, loyal to this club, and we decided to create the first Ultras group of women supporters in Morocco, which we call Green-Girls.” <https://green-girls01.skyrock.com/729333086-Banderole-Green-Girls.html>

17 “May God end this disaster and end the Ultras Green Girls that everyone saw in the stadium dancing in bikinis! They have turned the stadium into a bedroom!” [https://www.tiktok.com/@wydad\\_army/video/7111280670609034502?q=Ultras%20green%20girls&t=1678033798740](https://www.tiktok.com/@wydad_army/video/7111280670609034502?q=Ultras%20green%20girls&t=1678033798740)

## Modernity Through Stadiums

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the presence of women among football supporters in Morocco, as well as in other Maghreb and Arab countries. This was particularly evident during the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, where Moroccan women in colorful attire were seen in the stands, social spaces, and festivities following the matches. This conveyed an image of openness and freedom for women in spaces that were traditionally reserved for men. However, this raises two crucial questions: How was this presence negotiated and, more importantly, how do men continue to exclude women from the structures and micro-spaces where this supporterism is practiced and manifested, despite accepting and spreading images of female supporters in the media?

The increasing presence of women in Moroccan stadiums appears to reflect a government effort, as demonstrated through official directives mandating free access for women to stadiums during matches of the national football team since 2018.<sup>18</sup> However, these directives do not apply to local league or derby matches. Regardless of age or social status, women now reject passive spectatorship and aspire to fully experience the intense emotional atmosphere of stadiums, even if they must sometimes pay double for their presence. Access for women to stadiums is thus conditioned by costly tactics to deal with violence and harassment, such as having to purchase more expensive seats or travel with parents or male family members. However, despite women's increased access to stadiums, some sections remain inaccessible to them, especially those occupied by Ultras where rules of masculinity, virility, and power are most strongly enforced.

It is worth noting that the feminization of stadiums is evolving within the context of economic liberalism, as it is responding to market demands. Furthermore, an observer of the feminization of supporter spaces can also note a change in the aesthetics of these spaces. This includes the presence of advertisements targeting women and promoting commodities aimed at the female market, such as jewelry, clothing, and luxury items.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This is circular was disseminated in the context of gender-sensitive budgeting of the oversight ministry for the year 2018, and is no longer applicable.

<sup>19</sup> Cyril, F. (2010). "Adidas-woman is the future of sport". *Études & Analyses (É&A)*. <https://www.etudes-et-analyses.com/marketing/marketing-sportif/etude-de-marche/adidas-femme-avenir-sport-325258.html>

In the context of liberalized sports marketing, the presence of women in stadiums, particularly in Morocco, is being used as a tool to showcase to the world an image of modernity and equality, which challenges the stereotypical representation of a conservative and patriarchal global South. The World Cup provides an interesting case study, as it demonstrated how Moroccan female supporters broke into the traditionally male-dominated ecosystem of football, embodying two paradoxical images of women: one of independent travelers with financial freedom, and the other of a sacred motherhood through the image of the footballers' mothers.

## The Café and the Kitchen: The Battle over Rights and Spaces

It is important to acknowledge that the images in the media and on social networks of Moroccan women filling stadiums and fan zones do not represent the full picture of women's supporterism. It is necessary to consider the involvement of women in more popular and lower-income areas of big cities, such as cafes and neighborhoods, as well as the limitations faced by women in rural regions with inadequate infrastructure. The cost of supporterism is a key factor, and not all women in Morocco have the financial means to participate. There is a significant disparity between those who can afford to travel to matches or buy drinks in cafes to support the national team and those who are excluded from cafes for economic reasons or because of social norms and who cannot watch matches at home due to media monopolies.

During the 2022 World Cup, the profit-driven approach to sports favored by the liberal market resulted in football matches being unavailable on local and international free-to-air channels. To watch the national football team's matches, one needed either to subscribe to media services with exclusive broadcasting rights or pay an exorbitant fee at a coffee shop or have internet access and the knowledge to navigate to websites streaming fragments of the matches. As a result, this highlighted the unequal access to resources among citizens, particularly women, who were unable to follow a major sporting event related to their national team.

The achievements of the Moroccan national team have exposed the reality that there are still individuals in Morocco, especially women, who are excluded from participating in this dream. This highlights the fact that there is always a center and a margin, and that there are inequalities within the

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general state of inequality. The marginalized individuals are at the bottom of the ladder, and among them are women who suffer from discrimination and exclusion. The first pattern of discrimination they face is exclusion from public spaces, particularly cafes in the economically and geographically accessible neighborhoods of Casablanca.

Women who managed to gather the means to follow the matches in cafes that welcomed diversity sparked controversy on social media, particularly from men who believe that a woman's place is at home, specifically in the kitchen. Consequently, the exclusion of women was challenged by those who are less disadvantaged through videos that were widely shared on Tiktok, Instagram, and Facebook. One of the most popular videos was that of an Amazigh woman in her sixties claiming her right to watch the match. Other videos showed women of different ages standing outside cafes behind rows of seated men, attempting to watch the game from the street. However, men challenged the presence of women in cafes as an intrusion on their exclusive space. Some used the religious argument that women should stay at home, while others saw the presence of women as a limitation on their own freedom, accusing them of being immodest for being in a place where men could "unwittingly, in the course of following the matches," resort to vulgar and violent language. Others simply stated that the questions asked by women or their high-pitched voices disturbed them while watching the matches, asking women to leave and return to their kitchens, with the slogan "Kousintek"!

In this ongoing controversy, women are now claiming their right to frequent cafes, regardless of their social status, location, or financial resources, through videos and social media posts. They see these spaces not only as places for socializing but also for expressing public and political opinions, following the ideas of Habermas. On the other hand, the kitchen has become a symbol of male resistance to this form of female emancipation, with the hashtag "#Kousintek" (your kitchen) being used to reign women in. It should be noted that this term originated from a video shared on social media in which a preacher stated that "the place of women is in the kitchen."<sup>20</sup> This word was widely used on social media, especially during the football World Cup and the national women's team's participation in the African Cup, whenever it was deemed necessary to push women out of public space. However, with each victory of the women's team, women used the hashtag #kousintek, addressing men and ironically turning the tables on male supporters.

The conflict between women and men plays out through the conflict between the two micro-spaces of the kitchen and the café. Women are confined to the interior space of the kitchen,

which is primarily used for feeding and reproduction, as well as their non-remunerated labor. On the other hand, men have the privilege of the exterior space of the café, where they enjoy leisure and engage in social and political functions. These physical spaces are symbolic of the gendered roles of men and women, which are now being contested by women who are striving for greater equality in terms of rights and opportunities.

Paradoxically, while women were excluded from the spaces of fandom in Morocco during the World Cup, this same event brought to the world stage, thanks to the Moroccan team players, mothers who had long been marginalized due to their status as migrant women, widows who were taking care of their children alone, and wage workers occupying marginal and unrecognized jobs such as cleaners. This recognition and consecration have allowed all the marginalized people of Morocco to dream and encouraged them to make claims and demands at different levels in order to benefit from equal access to information, public space, and spaces of sociability that were long reserved for men. It also enabled them to demand the most basic rights and infrastructure such as internet coverage, or for matches to be broadcasted on national channels accessible to all citizens, whether male or female.

In contrast to the traditional expectation that all forms of female protest should be initiated or supported by civil society organizations and the women's movement, the protests that took place during the World Cup seemed to have emerged spontaneously and without prior contextual framing. These individual protests responded to personal needs, highlighting the disparities that exist not only between men and women, but also among women across regions, social classes, and economic levels. This suggests that Moroccan women from all walks of life have developed a grassroots protest discourse and challenge that is excluded or neglected by women's organizations and the movement alike.

The women's movement appears to be failing in one of its main missions, which is to support and frame the demands of women in their diversity. This could be seen as a sign of the movement's weakening, as its response has become slower, weaker, and only focused on major issues such as the reform of the personal status law. As a result, the feminist movement misses the opportunity to defend its principles of change in society by failing to capture demands that come from the margins. It also loses an innovative and visible space for claims and demands, such as Moroccan stadiums. For example, if during the latest Tifo of the derby between Wydad AC and Raja, which took place on 5 April 2023, a message was broadcast about the case of rape of an 11-year-old girl<sup>21</sup> in

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20 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3T0KW2yYr00> (long version)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wBGlc7fk> (short version)

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21 More commonly known as the Tifelt rape case, it refers to the crime of a collective rape of an 11-year-old girl in the region of Tifelt, north of

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Morocco and the injustice she suffered, it could have had a greater impact than the sit-in organized on the same day by the feminist coalition “Spring of Dignity.” Ironically, this sit-in, which gathered a hundred women in front of the Court of Appeal in Rabat, did not receive the same media coverage as that derby match!

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Rabat, which resulted in pregnancy. The accused were each sentenced to 2 years with the benefit of reduced sentences, which sparked a wave of protests in Morocco.

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### **About the Arab Reform Initiative**

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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