
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Press and Digital Discourses on Decriminalizing Consensual Relations in Morocco: A Netnographic Study

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| ABSTRACT

The decriminalization of consensual extramarital relations in Morocco, as proposed under reforms to Article 490 of the Penal Code, has created an intense debate intersecting culture, religion, domestic law, and human rights. This study investigates the digital debates surrounding this significant change in the socio-legal framework of the country. Using a netnographic approach, online comments and reactions to the announcement of the reform, and thematic analysis of newspaper articles to see how these reactions are echoed in prominent media outlets. Findings reveal that there is a polarization among Moroccans, since supporters of the decriminalization emphasize universal values like individual freedoms, bodily autonomy, and commitment to international human rights obligations. Opponents invoke religious values, cultural identity, and concerns about social order. Media echo and promote these divides depending on the orientation of the outlet. The study highlights Morocco's tension between modernity and traditional identity, which underscores the need for culturally sensitive reform.

| KEYWORDS

Human rights, cultural change, legal reforms, gender, women, morality

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 20 November 2024

PUBLISHED: 20 December 2025

DOI: 10.32996/jhsss.2025.7.12.10

Introduction:

Morocco stands at a complex crossroads, with the evolution of the socio-cultural landscape, the openness towards universal and global values, and the traditional classic Moroccan identity clashing on many levels, especially legally. The reform of the Moroccan family code, "*Moudawana*", in 2004 marked a significant step towards gender equality, human rights, and cultural preservation (Naciri, 2005). Even though the reform was influenced by international pressures and the establishment of new legal capacities for women, persistent gaps remain, such as the criminalization of consensual extramarital relations under Articles 490 and 491 of the penal code. This continued to disproportionally harm women through reinforcing the social stigma and prosecution that men can easily avoid, even though consensual relations are widely common, as scholars call it "public secrecy" (Fioole, 2021).

The change that the Moroccan socio-cultural landscape is going through is met by several contradictions and struggles. Since the country has ratified all nine core United Nations human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Interministerial Delegation for Human Rights, 2025), this creates tension between global obligations and local traditional cultural norms. Especially with the proposal to decriminalize consensual relations in private spaces, as announced by Justice Minister Abedlaltif Ouahbi in 2023, causing a great public backlash, and intensifying the public discourse, reflecting the broader societal cultural shifts as in later marriage ages (25.7 for women, 31.3 for men) and the increasing premarital sexual activity

(Bermine & Benzidan, 2022). A cultural shift that is characterized by combating patriarchal norms that are deeply rooted in the social fabric of many Moroccan women (Allal, 2025).

The article explores the existing discourse surrounding these reforms and how people express their support or opposition, and how these voices are echoed in online newspaper articles. Focusing on cultural, gendered, and human rights dimensions through a netnographic and thematic analysis of both YouTube comments and newspaper articles. By addressing three research questions: (a) How do Moroccans support or oppose decriminalization on digital platforms? (b) What roles do gender, religion, and human rights arguments play? (c) How do reforms influence perceptions of Morocco's human rights commitment? By linking the existing changes and reforms in Moroccan society to contemporary digital narratives, the study contributes to the literature on socio-legal changes in Muslim-majority societies.

Literature review:

The reforms regarding decriminalizing consensual relations outside of marriage have resulted in significant scholarly debates since the reform affects the social, political, cultural, and religious well-being of the Moroccans. Since the landmark family code "Moudawana" reforms of 2004, which were a milestone in the country's progress towards human rights and the elimination of discrimination against women (Naciri, 2005). Scholarly analysis has documented a complex and extensive political and religious struggle behind this reform, due to the intricate nature of the discussion. Morocco formally prohibits consensual relations outside of marriage under Articles 490 and 491 of the Penal Code, which criminalize premarital and extramarital sex (Naciri, 2005).

This literature review showcases the existing literature surrounding the complex intersection of law, religion, and culture in affecting the private lives and intimacy of Moroccans. It explores how the legal reforms, the existing cultures, and the Islamic identity all interact to regulate the Moroccans' private lives. Research has shown that these practices are highly common among Moroccans, trespassing all moral, legal, and social barriers (Fioole, 2021).

The background of the family code

The Moroccan family code 2004 reforms come as a middle ground between religious transcripts, political and international pressures, balancing domestic and social motives (Virkama, 2006). Historically, the first codification of the Moroccan family code, "*the Moudawana*," took place in the years 1957 and 1958, right after the country's independence (Centre for Public Impact, 2024). That version of the Moudawana was based on the Maliki Islamic jurisprudence, and it mainly gave the guardianship of the male over women, while permitting polygyny, and gave men the unilateral right to divorce, in addition to limiting women's rights in marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance (Centre for Public Impact, 2024). This form of the family code has harmed women proportionally and limited women under male legal and social superiority.

In 1993, due to the pressures from the rising women NGOs and humanitarians, reforms brought changes that gave women some authority in marriage, such as stipulating conditions in marriage contracts, in addition to restrictions on polygyny, and gave women several rights, yet were limited, in divorce procedures (Centre for Public Impact, 2024; Virkama, 2006). Even though the reforms brought change to several legislations, men remained heads of households.

In the late 90s, the debates regarding women's rights grew, with women's NGOs, human rights activists, and international organizations campaigning for deeper reforms. It took place in 2004, hence the Islamist resistance and framing the change as a "western-inspired" and seeing the change as a threat to the traditional Moroccan Islamic identity (Centre for Public Impact, 2024; Virkama, 2006). The 2004 reforms were a significant landmark for human rights activists and the country's progressive stance. Since the reforms brought up the marriage age to 18 for both men and women, while abolishing male guardianship for women over 18, and restricting polygyny (requiring a judicial authorization and the first wife's consent), also making divorce more equitable by giving women the right to initiate divorce, in addition to improving child custody rules for mothers, and the most significant change was joint responsibility in the family instead of exclusive male authority (Naciri, 2005). This reform was Islamic yet modern, balancing the Islamic views with the human rights obligations of the country.

Civil society has yet to remain in conflict; hence, the reforms that followed the demands of the human rights activists. Naciri (2005) reports that women still suffer from several restrictions, such as forbidding marrying non-Muslims, unlike men, in addition to disadvantages to women's custody over their children due to legal conservative interpretations by the judges (Naciri, 2005). Furthermore, one of the main widespread issues that is often tolerated is domestic violence, since victims face barriers such as providing medical proof and witnesses. Also, women's discriminatory inheritance, since they do not inherit equally to men. Additionally, rural women are denied their legal rights to have income and property, while unemployment remains high for women, especially educated urban women. Moreover, unsafe abortions persist due to their illegality unless to save a woman's life, in addition to the ban on extramarital relations and its legal repercussions that disproportionately harm women more than men (Naciri, 2005).

In short, the country's 2004 reforms marked the progress toward equality and balancing traditional Islamic laws with progressive rights. Yet, persistent gaps remain, such as inheritance rights, weak enforcement of protection, discrimination against women (especially rural), and entrenched patriarchal traditions.

Moroccan sexuality between marriage and consensual relations

Premarital sex is considered forbidden within Moroccan society, since it is better done secretly than publicly (Fioole, 2021). Secrecy plays a significant role when it comes to sexual activity, since women are judged differently from men (El Aji, 2017). Traditionally, women are not expected to take part in any sexual activity before marriage, since their families used to push for their young girls' marriage as early as 18, and any public sexual behavior is considered shameful, harmful, and disgraceful to the woman and her family (El Aji, 2017). However, since the late 80s, Moroccan culture has undergone a significant change, as Moroccans started to engage more in premarital relations, especially with the rise of marriage age for both men and women, 25.7 for women, and 31.3 for men (Bermime & Benzidan, 2022). Bermine & Benzidan's (2022) study shows that over 40% report having premarital sex, with 54% of men and 26% of women. Yet, the study also shows how sexuality is still stigmatized, especially for women, since they are obliged to keep their virginity until marriage, while men are expected to be sexually active. This shows how Moroccan society suffers from double standards that harm women disproportionately.

The legal reform of 2004's backlash brought severe social changes in how Moroccans see marriage, since as much as the reforms advocated for women's agency, a counter-part view believes that it's the reason for the decline in marriage rates, pushing people towards engaging in pre-marital relations (Deiana, 2009). Interestingly, even within these communities, women remain stigmatized, blamed, and anxious; that's why they engage in relations that "don't harm their honor" and keep their virginity for marriage.

Morocco's human rights obligations, challenges, and implementations

Morocco's a strong commitment to international human rights standards through ratifying all nine core UN human rights treaties. Since the country joined the International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in 1970, it has also ratified both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1979 (Interministerial Delegation for Human Rights, 2025). One of the highlights of Morocco's commitment to human rights was the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention Against Torture (CAT) in 1993, followed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the International Convention on Migrant Worker's Rights (ICRMW) in the same year (Interministerial Delegation for Human Rights, 2025). Later commitments include the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2009, the International Convention for Protection from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) in 2013, and key optional protocols - notably the 2022 accessions to the CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) Optional Protocol and First Optional Protocol to the Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). These ratifications bind Morocco to international standards of protection against racial discrimination, child exploitation, disability exclusion, torture, and gender inequality (*Morocco's Universal Periodic Review: How Human Rights Have Declined Over the Past Five Years* | MENA Rights Group, 2022).

Despite the country's significant record of ratification, several challenges arise on the domestic level, since there are some significant disparities between the global commitments and the country's laws. Many conventions, particularly CEDAW, ICCPR, and ICESCR, require substantial change in family law, "*Moudawana*", criminal law, and procedural justice (Naciri, 2005). Thus, leading Morocco to keep several reservations when adopting the conventions concerning nationality rights, gender equality, and personal relations, which weakened the practical effects of the treaty. Similar obstacles exist in the penal code, where consensual relations outside marriage remain criminalized under Article 490, despite Morocco's obligations under ICCPR to respect privacy and non-discrimination (Naciri, 2005).

With this, contemporary Morocco's civil society landscape has become polarized by ideological movements, which are secular-modernists and religious traditionalists (Akalay, 2021). Since seculars draw from international human rights conventions and seek to limit religion to the private sphere, they aim to make the public completely secular. In addition to advocating for a top-down legal reform, by changing the laws first to force a culture change, which can result in absolute equality (Sadiqi, 2008; Akalay, 2021). On the contrary, traditional Islamists consider religious texts as the main and only source of legislation, and they advocate for a bottom-up religio-cultural reform, arguing that deconstructing patriarchal interpretations of religion is a prerequisite for lasting change, which they often frame the goal as "justice" and complementarity, emphasizing not only different but equitable family roles (Akalay, 2021).

To address the situation, Morocco has undertaken several reforms and measures, including legal reforms, based on dialogue and tolerance between all the parties involved. Akalay (2021) argues that both movements, hence they differ in background, share a

common goal, which is gender justice. And the 2004 reforms were a result of a successful convergence for even a broader movement that balances human rights and the Sharia, thinking in a pragmatic way for the greater good of Moroccan society, without blindly recreating the French secularism and preserving the specificities of Moroccan society.

The roles of the Moroccan media

The Moroccan media has gone through several changes throughout history. Pre-colonial Moroccans had a tradition of transmitting news orally; the early years of the 20th century witnessed a rise in the foreign language press, which led to the creation of the first national press; during the colonial era, 1912 to 1956, the French-language press dominated the media but was faced with nationalist resistance newspapers (Benchenna et al., 2017). After the independence, the state controlled most of the media by establishing “the Press Code in 1958, which allowed the media to serve the role of keeping order and reinforcing state values (Gaoual & Berkane, 2025). In the late 90s, and with the ratification of many of the human rights conventions, Morocco witnessed a significant liberalization of the media, allowing an enormous expansion of private TV/radio channels, with a sense of censorship (Gaoual & Berkane, 2025). In the early 2000s and until today, Morocco has experienced a significant growth of social media platforms, which led to the growth of youth activism, misinformation, and trust issues, but it also helped shape the youth’s voices against political and social corruption (Miller et al., 2023).

Digital media has granted Moroccans access to information and empowered marginalized voices, such as women, Amazigh communities, and seculars, to speak their minds freely and engage civically. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter (known now as X), and YouTube voiced Moroccan’s opinions on significant issues related to education, gender equality, health, and migration (Miller et al., 2023).

Gaoual & Berkane (2025) found that modern online newspapers and digital platforms shape Moroccan public opinion today by misaligning with the limited perspectives of classic newspapers and offering alternative views on significant social issues. Also, online newspapers have become a main source of information for Moroccan youth who are less likely to trust state-censored TV or traditional press. Moreover, Benchenna et al. (2017) believe that misinformation is widespread among democratized online newspapers, since credibility remains an issue, as ownership structures and financial dependencies sometimes limit their freedom. According to the OECD (2023), only around 40% of Moroccans trust mainstream media, reflecting trust issues within the media ecosystem. Thus, online newspapers are described as “central” to the opinions of Moroccans, since they shape and reflect societal transformations on topics like women’s rights, migration, equality, and cultural identity.

All in all, online newspapers play several pivotal roles when it comes to shaping the public opinions of the Moroccans. Even though it is met with skepticism around credibility and authenticity, it still functions as a penning space for marginalized debates, mobilizing youth, and articulating alternative narratives.

Research methodology:

The methodology chapter illustrates the scientific foundation for the study and the choices employed to investigate the complex public and media discourse surrounding the proposed decriminalization of consensual extramarital relations in Morocco.

Research objectives

The primary objective of the study is to investigate online public discourse regarding the decriminalization of consensual relations in Morocco’s legal reforms, focusing on cultural, gendered, and human rights dimensions.

Research questions

To fulfill the study’s objective, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do Moroccans oppose or support the reforms regarding the decriminalization of consensual relations on digital platforms?
- What role do gender, religion, and human rights arguments play in shaping the debate?
- How do these reforms influence perceptions of Morocco’s commitment to human rights in both national and international contexts?

Research design

This study employs a qualitative media analysis to examine and explore the press discourse shaping the decriminalization of consensual relations under Article 490 of Morocco’s Penal Code, and to understand the existing opinions. The analysis combines a netnographic approach with thematic analysis into a two-phase analytical approach. This design allows an in-depth, authentic

exploration of the complex social phenomena surrounding the analysis of textual data, seeking to understand recurring themes and patterns within their cultural and social context (Kozinets, 2015).

Data collection

The study employed netnography as the primary methodological approach, collecting data from 199 public comments on the YouTube video by GOUD TV (2023) that has the Minister of Justice's statement regarding decriminalizing consensual relations. The comments were mostly in Moroccan Arabic and French, while a tiny proportion was in English. To ensure the accuracy and integrity of the analysis, a rigorous translation protocol was implemented, starting with an initial translation of the comments from Darija (Moroccan Arabic), Standard Arabic, and French to English done by the researcher, who is a native speaker of Darija. To avoid researcher bias and ensure translation accuracy, the translated comments, prioritizing those containing religious terminology or culturally specific expressions, were reviewed by a professional translation service. This service specializes in both types of Arabic, Moroccan, and standard, and French to English translations. They also provided links to certified translations for religious texts and Quranic verses. And to ensure more authenticity, a back-translation check was done on the primary comments that were central to the emergence of major themes by an independent bilingual translator. Blinded to the original translation. This back-translation was compared to the other original translation to rectify any vague discrepancies in meaning, tone, or nuance (Brislin, 1970). This allowed the thematic analysis to be conducted on the final verified English-language transcripts, while the original comments remained accessible to allow cross-reference.

To add to the netnographic data, a purposive sample of ten (10) online newspaper articles was selected to capture a range of perspectives, including Moroccan and international outlets with progressive, conservative, and neutral backgrounds. The Articles were selected based on their direct relevance to the topic of decriminalizing Article 490 and their publication within a relevant timeframe of 2024 to 2025 (see Table 1).

Headline	Author(s)	Year	Outlet
#Stop490: Moroccan Campaign Calls for Normalization of Sex Outside Marriage	Zineb-Bourchouk	2021	Morocco World News
Sexual relationships between two consenting adults do not concern society	Sana-Elouazi	2018	Morocco World News
The Rabat League of Maghreb Scholars Warns Against Legalizing Zina Under the Guise of 'Consensual Relations' and Calls on Scholars to Unite	Not specified	2023	Howya Press
Avortement, sexualité hors mariage : des interdits contournés au Maroc (Abortion, sex outside marriage: prohibitions circumvented in Morocco)	Terriennes Myriam Fimbry (Radio Canada)	2023	TV5MONDE
Mustapha Ramid: 'La loi ne sanctionne pas les relations sexuelles consenties dans l'espace privé' (Mustapha Ramid: 'The law doesn't penalize consensual sexual relations in private spaces')	Benadad	2019	Le360.ma
Morocco: ending ban on extramarital relationships divides politicians	Atti	2023	The New Arab
Morocco: Sex outside marriage, a taboo subject that promises to spice up the legislative elections	Bouanani	2021	Middle East Eye (French edition)
Morocco Struggles at 137th Place in 2025 Gender Equality	Naim	2025	Morocco World News

Rankings			
Morocco suffers from stereotypes that damage its image	García	2025	Atalayar. Between Two Shores
Morophobia, Orientalism, or obsession? Morocco through interested eyes	Haddad et Al.	2025	Atalayar Between Two Shores

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Starting with familiarization with the data by reading it several times to identify the primary impressions. Following up with generating initial codes, segmenting the comments into what they reflect. This allows for the next phase, which is grouping the codes into potential themes that reflect the data. These tentative themes get refined and merged with overlapping ones to craft a final version of these themes. These themes get defined and named to avoid confusion and maintain scientific rigor. These themes are linked to the research questions and to relevant literature.

Validity and reliability

To ensure the study's validity and reliability, as in Kozinets (2015), the data collected were from two different online sources (public comments on a YouTube video and the content of newspaper articles) helped reduce bias and increase trustworthiness. In addition, thematic analysis was conducted following a transparent and systematic coding process. This included peer-reviewing, expert consulting, and revisiting decisions to ensure consistency in interpretation. Thus, construct validity was maintained by grounding themes in Morocco's socio-political context, including human rights convictions like CEDAW.

Ethical considerations

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the study adhered to a set of ethical principles outlined in the American Psychological Association guidelines (Bradley et al., 2020). Since the study involves public data, no informed consent was required, but anonymity was preserved by avoiding identifiable commenter details (such as name and specific exact wordings). Cultural sensitivity was prioritized, given Morocco's religious context, to avoid cultural or religious misrepresentation or exacerbating stereotypes. Gender and class issues were handled academically and respectfully, focusing on empowerment rather than stigmatization. No harm was anticipated, and the study promotes human rights discourse while preserving the cultural specificity of the country. The collected and interpreted data were stored securely, and conflicts of interest, such as the researcher's positionality, were disclosed.

Limitations

The study faces several limitations. First, representativeness is limited, since netnography captures only the voices of those active online; besides, the number of comments (199) may not fully reflect the Moroccan wider population. Those who lack internet access and those who refrain from public discussions, and those who have not been able to view the video are excluded from the data analysis, which allows a sense of bias towards a specific standpoint. In addition to the limitations of the netnographic data, the 10 (ten) articles analyzed, while diverse in source, language, and orientation, are from selected outlets. This may have led to overlooking state-controlled media or Arabic-only sources, which can introduce a selection bias. Finally, the time-bounded nature of the discussion, since the digital discourse can rapidly change with the social changes that can happen with the 2026 elections.

Despite these limitations, the study makes several contributions. First, it captures authentic voices and sentiments that are rarely voiced within the traditional methods of research. Especially in such a sensitive topic. Second, the reliance on comments and articles from a selected source may introduce bias, yet it can also reflect the existing discourse where debates about sexuality actually unfold. This contributes to understanding how public discourse is framed, contested, and circulated in consensual relations. Finally, while the time-bounded nature of online debates could limit generalizability, the study offers a snapshot of the socio-political moment and how it is articulated through media outlets. Thus, even with the limitations, the study advances our understanding of how Moroccans negotiate sexuality, law, and morality in public digital spaces.

Findings and analysis:

I- Analysis of comments

The data for this project was gathered from a few videos and their comment sections. One key source is a 46-second video from the Moroccan YouTube channel Goud.MA, featuring a statement by Abdellatif Ouahbi, the Minister of Justice and a member of the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) (Wikipedia contributors, 2024). In the video, Minister Ouahbi explicitly states: **"We are on our way to decriminalizing consensual relations in private space; however, in the public space, there will be some regulations to keep the mutual respect and public decency. Thus, we are going on the way to cancel the Article that decriminalizes it"** (GOUD TV, 2023).

The video has This announcement sparked significant debate among Moroccan citizens, dividing public opinion as it challenged deeply rooted social, cultural, and religious norms. The comments section of the video is a condensed representation of the ongoing debate among different Moroccan opinions, as the comment section had 199 comments, Approximately 73.3% -146 - of the comments were against Decriminalization, while 22.7% -45- were pro-decriminalization, and 4% -8- comments were deemed inappropriate since they either contained colloquial vulgar language, or were off-topic (like questions to the video editor for instance) that were analyzed There were three primary themes among these responses: individuals who opposed decriminalization, those who were in favor of it, and others who didn't express a clear opinion or just expressed an emotional reaction. These insights provide a nuanced perspective on the different standpoints that exist in Morocco regarding the issue.

1- Opposition to Decriminalization

The comment section of the people who oppose the decriminalization of extramarital relations showed five more sub-themes. Firstly, people who give religious justifications go back to the Quran and the hadith verses. A significant percentage of commenters (57 comments, approx. 39.3%) referenced Quranic verses and Hadith to support their stance. For instance, more than seven individuals cited the third verse of Surah An-Nur, which states: " **الزَّانِي لَا يَنْكِحُ إِلَّا زَانِيَةً أَوْ مُشْرِكَةً وَالزَّانِيَةُ لَا يَنْكِحُهَا إِلَّا زَانٍ أَوْ مُشْرِكٌ** " **تُحَرِّمُ ذَلِكَ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ**, which translates to English as: **"The fornicator does not marry except a [female] fornicator or polytheist, and none marries her except a fornicator or a polytheist, and that [i.e., marriage to such persons] has been made unlawful to the believers."** (QS. An-Nur, ayah 3). (QuranHadits, n.d.). However the Quranic verse has many explanations, but the most common one is by Mufti Taqi Usmani, which links "fornicating" to being a polytheist, which is the highest/ worst position in the Islamic tradition. The verse also explicitly prohibits the marriage of a fornicator, whether male or female, to a believer, reinforcing the moral and legal boundaries set by Islamic teachings (QuranHadits, n.d.). Another explanation of this verse by Abdul Haleem states: **"The adulterer is only [fit] to marry an adulteress or an idolatress, and the adulteress is only [fit] to marry an adulterer or an idolater: such behavior is forbidden to believers"** (QuranHadits, n.d.). This creates a dogma around consensual relations, which seems to be a recurring theme among the interpreters and exegetes when it comes to the explanation of this specific verse.

Several comments called for the application of the Sharia Law regarding people who have extramarital consensual relations as in the second verse of Surah An-Nur that states: " **الزَّانِيَةُ وَالزَّانِي فَاجْلِدُوا كُلَّ وَاحِدٍ مِّنْهُمَا مِائَةَ جَلْدَةٍ وَلَا تَأْخُذْكُمْ بِهِمَا رَأْفَةٌ فِي دِينِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَلَيْشَهِدَ عَذَابُهُمَا طَائِفَةٌ مِّنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ** " which translates to **"The [unmarried] woman or [unmarried] man found guilty of sexual intercourse – lash each one of them with a hundred lashes, and do not be taken by pity for them in the religion [i.e., law] of Allah, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a group of the believers witness their punishment. (QS. An-Nur, ayah 2)"** (QuranHadits, n.d.). The verse clearly states the harsh punishment for those who had sexual intercourse without marriage, which is flogging each with 100 stripes publicly.

A significant number of opposing comments further argued that because Islam is the state religion of Morocco, where over 98% of the population identifies as Muslim, national laws should align with Islamic legal principles and Sharia (International Center for Law and Religion Studies, n.d.). However, many others comment that there is no such thing as "consensual relations," but there is only "adultery or fornication," which are both unacceptable in the Islamic code of beliefs.

To sum up, 39.3% of the comments approximately used Islamic verses and scriptures to oppose the decriminalization of consensual relations and label it in religious terms like "adultery" and "fornication".

A second significant theme appeared in the comments that opposed the decriminalization of consensual relations and showed concerns regarding the ethical and moral decay of Moroccan citizens, since Moroccans have always had a sense of conservatism and patriarchy throughout history. Approximately 25.7% (38 comments) of the comments opposing decriminalization fear that with this decriminalization, the classic social structures will break, and new phenomena will emerge, like single parenthood, abandoned children, and moral corruption that goes against Islamic and traditional teachings. On the same issue, many other comments emphasized the importance of preserving honor and dignity, directly tied to adherence to

Islamic purposes. Many comments noted that morality is tied to religious values, and even if consensual relations were decriminalized by law, the greater law of religion would prevail, and it would not be accepted easily among Moroccan-Muslim individuals. Thus, several comments condemned the officials who supported decriminalization and warned them of divine judgment. All in all, 25.7% of the provided comments fear the moral decay of the Moroccan conservative values that are derived from the Islamic scriptures, and give impassioned condemnations to the ones who support Decriminalization.

The third emerging theme within the comments contained harsh criticism of the political and governmental Moroccan policies. These commenters accuse policymakers of serving foreign agendas and deliberately undermining Morocco's traditional and conservative values. Approximately 12.5% (18 comments) of the comments expressed this sentiment, framing the proposed legal reforms as an external attempt to erode national identity. The Moroccan identity has always been linked to Islamic values culturally, socially, and constitutionally. Thus, it made some commenters put direct moral blame on politicians who are advocating for this reform, accusing them of failing to uphold moral standards. However, this tension between national identity and the universalism of Morocco and the preamble of the Moroccan Constitution grants priority to international human rights obligations over domestic law (Idrissi, 2021).

The fourth and final recurring theme that appeared in the comments opposing decriminalization was centered on fear of immediate conservative backlash, such as violence, family breakdown, and honor-based conflicts. Many commenters argued that Moroccan society has not undergone the same cultural shifts as Western nations, suggesting that such legal changes would provoke a significant backlash from conservative and fundamentalist groups. This is apparent in the mobility made by the conservative party's PJD stance on the issue of the reforms, as in Bouananni(2021). Unlike the second theme, which is concerned with a slower, more gradual erosion of traditional values, such as the traditional family structure and moral integrity. An approximate proportion of 22.5% (33 comments) of commenters within this theme used words that condemned the whole "westernized, profane, threat" policy and believed that it would ruin the whole Moroccan cultural heritage and identity. This raises concerns about the immediate backlash that might

To conclude, the opposition to extramarital-consensual relations in Morocco is deeply rooted in religious, sociocultural, moral, and political concerns. The majority of the opposing comments are framed within the Islamic teachings and principles, with a significant portion of the comments referencing Quranic verses and Hadith to assert that extramarital relations constitute adultery or fornication, which remain definitively prohibited under Islamic teachings. Given that Morocco is a predominantly Muslim country, plenty argued that its laws should reflect and uphold Islamic principles rather than diverge from its teachings and Sharia.

Beyond religious justifications, a significant portion of commenters fear that decriminalization would lead to moral and ethical decay, with long-lasting conflicts within the social structures. Concerns about single parenthood, family breakdown, and a decline in traditional patriarchal values frequently arose, with many believing that this specific legal reform would challenge the cultural and religious fabric of Moroccan society. This made some commenters accuse Moroccan policymakers and politicians of implementing Westernized agendas that threaten national identity. This sentiment reflects broader anxieties about cultural imperialism and the erosion of Morocco's Islamic and traditional values.

Finally, many opposing voices highlight the potential social consequences of the decriminalization of consensual extramarital relations, warning that this enormous shift could trigger a backlash from conservative and fundamentalist groups, with fear of increased social instability, honor-related violence, and cultural deterioration, which shows that Moroccan society is not prepared for such a legal change.

To sum up, the resistance to decriminalization is a complex interchange of religious convictions, moral concerns, political distrust, and fears of cultural transformation and deterioration. The strong opposition believes that any reform of this genre in Morocco must take into account the deeply entrenched religious and traditional beliefs that shape public opinion on issues of morality and law in Morocco.

2- Supporters of Decriminalization:

In contrast to the opposition, the comments favoring the decriminalization of consensual extramarital relations present a different set and style of arguments, expressing a shift in social attitudes towards individual freedoms and legal reforms. Supporters strongly emphasized the right to individual liberty, questioning the state's role in regulating private individual matters. Many also note an inconsistency between Moroccan law and the reality of religion, arguing that other religiously prohibited behaviors, like alcohol consumption and public entertainment (music, festivals, parties), are highly tolerated among Moroccans, while there is a dogma surrounding consensual relationships. There were 45 comments - approximately 22,7% - who were in favor of the decriminalization, arguing four main points.

The first theme among supporters of consensual relations called for individual freedom and personal liberty, with approximately 40% (18 comments) of the comments emphasizing the importance of personal freedom and the right of individuals to make decisions regarding their private lives without state interference. Supporters also argue that consenting adults should have full control over their private lives as a fundamental right. The language of the comments was also supportive, as a comment that states "تحياتي لك السيد الوزير صراحة في القضاء الخاص بالانسان حر فحياتو شكرا لك" which directly translates to "greetings to you, Mr. minister. Honestly, in private spaces, a person is free in their life. Thank you." With many other comments calling consensual relations words such as "natural, necessary, important," and many other words.

The second theme that emerged among supporters highlighted a clear inconsistency in applying Islamic principles, with approximately percentage of 27% (12 comments) of the supporters pointing out that other "haram" (forbidden) practices, such as alcohol consumption and trade, public immodesty, and music festivals, are extremely tolerated while consensual relationships remain criminalized. An example of the comments that highlighted the "social hypocrisy" and the inconsistency of the law : "معك يا وهبي... شخصان بالغان راضيان فلهما حريتهما... الناس لتقول لا هذا بلد اسلامي نلقاوه كيقلب على ش وحدة باش يمارس معاها ويلا كان المغرب بلد اسلامي "" : Which translates to "I'm with you, Ouahbi... Two consenting adults have their freedom... People say no, this is an Islamic country, but we find them looking for someone to have relations with. If Morocco is an Islamic country, then ban alcohol, singing, drugs, and immodesty—all of which are haram—but you only focus on consensual relations."

Another proportion of the supporters believe that the existing law doesn't necessarily reflect the reality of things, since approximately 20% (9 comments) of the supporters argue that criminalizing consensual relations is outdated and ineffective, as such relationships already occur regardless of the existing law. Decriminalization would merely recognize an existing reality rather than encourage a new behavior. Making laws more in line with modern Moroccan society. However, several supporters emphasized that marital infidelity and rape must remain criminalized, while consensual relations between adults are a personal matter and should no longer be criminalized. It's worth noting that Morocco was one of the countries that were colonized by the French state, and at that specific period, while laying the foundations of the Moroccan governing system, France decided to use Islam, but not as a system of governing, rather than just instrumentalizing religion to gain further political control over the area (Idrissi, 2021). The thing that resulted in a gap between the pre-existing culture and the laws governing the public. This is more apparent in the preamble to the French version of the 2011 Moroccan constitution which states that the monarchy of Morocco is a "Muslim state" (*Etat musulman*), whereas the Arabic version of the constitution refers to it as being an "Islamic state" in means of "*dawla Islamiyya*", this is intentionally done to avoid identifying the state as *Islamic* in French to avoid the negative interpretations of west's state's being extremist, Islamist, and even terrorist (Idrissi, 2021).

The final argument among the supporters was a direct criticism of social judgment and double standards, especially regarding women's freedom and autonomy. Approximately 13% (6 comments) argue for women's agency without fear of societal backlash. This can give them the voice to challenge the pre-existing patriarchal attitudes by asserting that women have full freedom and the right to make personal choices regarding relationships. One comment specifically critiques the use of terms like "deyyouth," which is a derogatory term for a man who does not control the woman in his family. This has been a common point of view among activists who believe that the social judgment of the Moroccan community can lead to harsh and unforgivable consequences, as in the case of Hajar Raissouni, who is a newspaper writer for an independent Moroccan newspaper who was arrested with charges of engaging in premarital sex and having an abortion (Kafker, 2020). This incident sparked a significant debate between human rights activists and fundamentalists regarding the case of this writer since conservative and fundamentalist groups condemned her and accused her socially of challenging Islamic values that shape Moroccan society, in contrast to the activists and civil society organizations who support the younger generation's rebellion on the patriarchal, classic standard norms and calling for more liberty based on the global culture calling for more personal freedoms and advocating for legal reforms for the article 490.

All in all, in contrast to the opposition, supporting views advocate for a more independent perspective on personal freedoms, especially in the context of reforming Article 490 of the Moroccan penal code, since the majority of supporters believe that private premarital sexual relations among two consenting adults, without violence, should not be a matter of public concern. And they advocate for individual freedom away from social and legal restrictions that foreigners can have in Morocco, even with the existing law (Sana-Elouazi, 2018).

Morocco is progressing and "undertaking" progressive stands when it comes to the protection of the rights of Man and international humanitarian law as universally recognized (Idrissi, 2021). This raises a tension between classical "national identity" on the one hand and secular humanitarian universalism of international law on the other. However, the fundamental values mentioned by the opposers are implicitly referred to in Article 175 of the constitution: "No revision may infringe the provisions relative to the Muslim religion, on the monarchy of the state, on the democratic choice of the Nation" (Idrissi, 2021). In simple

words, the Muslim religion is the state religion, and whatever reform is taken should align, even if partially, with the Islamic religion.

II- Press discourse on consensual relations:

In addition to the netnographic analysis of the online comments of the official video regarding the decriminalization of consensual relations, the study also delves into the discourse presented in Moroccan online newspaper texts regarding the same topic. Media narratives play a pivotal role in directing public opinions and impacting the socio-political debates, especially within this range of issues. A thematic analysis was conducted on articles from prominent Moroccan online newspapers.

1- Media discourse of consensual freedoms in Morocco:

By examining themes such as moral decay, religious opposition, social consequences, political criticism, pro-decriminalization pressures, and gender/class disparities, the newspaper articles are meant to illustrate how media narratives shape the country's polarized debate. The discourse manifests in the tensions between the Islamic traditional identity of the Moroccans and the progressive movement of human rights with articles like Bourchouk (2021) and Terriennes (2023) advocating reform, while Benadad (2020) and Howya Press (2023) defend conservative values, reflecting the broader socio-political context ahead of the 2026 elections (Atti, 2023; International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 2025).

a- Media between religious morality and freedom

In the Moroccan context, the issue of consensual relations goes beyond legal implications and the country's legal framework since there are different perspectives on the same matter, and press and media discourse can contribute to the existing views regarding the topic. Many digital-first news platforms contributed to the media landscape of the issue. In an article in Morocco World News by Zineb-Bourchouk (2021) headlined "*#Stop490: Moroccan Campaign Calls for Normalization of Sex Outside Marriage*", the authors first expressed the existing discourse, mentioning movements like "Moroccan Outlaws" which call for the abolishment of Article 490 of the Moroccan code. The movement gained momentum when a woman, Hanae, was charged with extramarital sex and indecent assault after a former partner shared a private video of her online, while the man was not charged — a fact that raised questions about how discriminatory the law is towards women. The incident sparked many responses from different activists who believe that this law violates individual freedoms and perpetuates discrimination and violence against women, while emphasizing that the existing legal framework is outdated. The article, however, shares the opposite standpoint of Moroccans: "*Moroccans believe it upholds Islamic values and prohibits the normalization of sex outside of wedlock. Reacting to what they perceived as an unwelcome defiance of Moroccan and Islamic values, the anti-campaign activists started a counter-mobilization under the hashtag #KEEP490*" (Zineb-Bourchouk). The article is written in a tone and language that call for freedom of choice since it provides several arguments about how this law violates intimate and personal freedom, while the arguments supporting the existing status quo were constrained and confined to perspectives that support decriminalization and "contradictory with the Muslim ethics and with ethics in general".

In an earlier article by Sana-Elouazi (2018) headlined "*sexual relationships between two consenting adults do not concern society*", on the progressive outlet Morocco World News, similar themes emerged, since the article highlights the tension between conservative existing values and individual freedoms of Moroccan society. The minister in the justice department at the time emphasized that consensual relations should not concern society and should be held in private. However, people should abide by the public social and cultural norms. Interestingly, the article refers to the roots of the legal framework – penal code article 490 – and its roots in Islamic law, and how Islam prohibits extramarital relations. Thus, the article also mentions the exemption of foreign couples from this law, expressing a sort of inconsistency in real-life application. Furthermore, the articles also shed light on the role of activists and NGOs in pursuing the repeal of Article 490, while conservative stakeholders believe that laws should align with Islamic traditional values.

All in all, the tone of the article is primarily informative, shedding light on different perspectives on the issue, without clearly favoring a specific point of view, but slightly inclining towards the personal freedoms standpoint. Even though Sana-Elouazi (2018) discussed individual freedoms and progressive lines of thinking, the author expressed a respectful tone toward traditional values. The article also contains a progressive undertone supporting reforms, since it overemphasizes the social and real-life inconsistencies in the law raised by feminist and activist NGOs, reflecting the ongoing tension between modernity and tradition in Morocco and the challenges of balancing individual human rights with classic traditional norms.

Interestingly, not all media articles expressed a neutral stance towards decriminalization, since much of the social and political sphere affects the readership of the press outlet. Nevertheless, an article by Howya Press (2023) expressed a clear condemnation of calls to decriminalize consensual relations in Morocco, citing an official statement by the Rabat League of Maghreb Scholars. The content of the article, which contained the statement, aligned with the comments condemning the decriminalization in the minister's video (GOUD TV, 2023); a similar pattern of argumentation has been adopted as the statement

cites Quranic verses and Hadiths in the prohibition of extramarital relations, asserting the absolutism of the divine morality and warns of divine punishment- using the same verses as used in comments by the commenters who are against the decriminalization. The statement went further to declare advocating for "zina's" legalization as apostasy since it contradicts the fundamental basis of the Islamic principles. With that, the Rabat League of Maghreb Scholars calls for unified resistance against those who advocate for decriminalization through their statement in the press article in Howya Press (2023).

An interesting argument by the Rabat League of Maghreb Scholars accused the Decriminalization of being a "civilization threat" to the classical social structures and social order, since the author appealed to the emotional rhetoric using phrases such as "destroying morals and values", "divine wrath", and "open invitation to zina". This framing of the issue as a "civilization threat" demonizes the advocates and labels reformists as enemies of Islam (accusing them of apostasy) and demands social and collective resistance against these reformists, creating a vast "us vs. them" narrative. The article also ties - and limits- Morocco's national identity to the Islamic law of the constitution and rejects the distinction between private consent and public morality, which is a form of justification of authoritarian control over private lives, reinforcing pre-existing cultural and social norms, even if these norms have hidden inequalities and hypocritical natures behind them. Fauster (2014) highlighted this distinction between the Islamic cultural mentality and reality. Since Fauster (2014) found that women "get the short end of the stick" when found guilty of consensual relations, society labels them with the worst names possible, all to keep the "religious" and "cultural" honor of the family, while the men usually don't receive as much labelling and in many cases, they don't receive much repercussions as women. This conservative stance reinforces the traditional patriarchal religious stance, unlike Terriennes (2023), who believes that women are disproportionately affected by these norms.

Overall, the article serves as an official statement from the Rabat League of Maghreb Scholars, aimed at Moroccan and liberal feminist movements (e.g., Stop490), strongly condemning calls to decriminalize consensual extramarital relations in Morocco and framing it as a "major sin" in Islam. It cites Quranic verses and Hadiths to assert the absolute prohibition of adultery, or "zina." Additionally, the article perceives decriminalization as a threat to Moroccan society, Islamic identity, and family values, while advocating for unified resistance and labeling the promotion of decriminalization as 'apostasy' since it directly contradicts the established rules of Islamic principles.

To further the discussion, an article headlined "*Abortion, sex outside marriage: prohibitions circumvented in Morocco*" by Terriennes (2023) on TV5 monde outlet, it presents an interview with the socio-activist Sanaa El Aji El Hanafi, who is known for her advocacy for personal and individual freedom regarding sexuality and abortion, calls the article 490 of the Moroccan penal code absurd in light of Moroccan society's changing behavior. Terriennes (2023) explains how social hypocrisy leads to premarital sex happening in the shadows widely. This leaves people vulnerable to arrest and social stigma in the case of exposure. This affects the underprivileged more than the wealthy individuals. This inequality extends to access to abortion, which Terriennes (2023) believes is widely spread (around 600 illegal abortions daily) since it is legally restricted, expensive, and unsafe for women's health. El Aji emphasizes that it's women's right to choose motherhood or not, since abortion is a carrier of the Moroccan double standards, since it can lead to physical, psychological, and social harm to women, but will not affect the man's reputation.

The article contains themes that appear to recur in the discourse. One of the most prominent themes was the contradiction between the law and reality, since El Aji illustrated how premarital sex is highly accepted socially, but punished legally. This means that the law doesn't prioritize the well-being of citizens, but rather reaffirms the social hypocrisy that negatively affects the poor. The second theme is economic and social inequality, since access to personal freedoms (like privacy or abortion) is largely influenced by the class and wealth of the parties. The third issue El Aji draws attention to is the issue of bodily autonomy, and she frames abortion as a matter of personal choice and health, not morality or religion. This is a form of resistance against the belief that legalization leads to a decrease in morality and abuse, but instead, she advocates for trust in women's decisions. The third theme within the article is gender and patriarchy, which is a recurring theme in the discussion of personal freedoms. This theme is apparent in the resistance against the stigma allocated to women for having extramarital relations or an abortion, a situation that is only for women to bear socially and legally. The final theme is societal readiness and resistance. The question of "Is society ready for change?" when it comes to certain freedoms can be tricky and has several implications for different areas of citizens' lives. El aji believes that this debate only arises among the marginalized, underprivileged groups.

Overall, Terriennes' (2023) article contributes to the human rights discourse of support for individual freedoms by framing it in areas like sexuality, class, gender, and politics. This supports resistance against outdated patriarchal norms that affect women and the underprivileged class.

In an article by Benadad (2019) in Le360.ma online newspaper headlined "*Mustapha Ramid: 'La loi ne sanctionne pas les relations sexuelles consenties dans l'espace privé'*", which translates to: "*Mustapha Ramid: 'The law doesn't penalize consensual*

sexual relations in private spaces". Benadad (2019) examines the political and social discourse surrounding the suggested reforms of Morocco's penal code, specifically the application of Article 490. Mustapha Ramid was serving as Morocco's Minister of State in charge of Human Rights in 2019, made the statement in the context of an ongoing debate about personal freedoms in the country, expressing how the law, Article 490, has a controversial application when it comes to valuing public decency more than criminalizing the act itself (Benadad, 2019).

This statement was made by a member of the conservative party, such as the Justice Development Party (PJD), which reflects the efforts to balance Islamic moral principles with legal reforms and clarifications. The article reflects a narrative that confirms the existing laws in the face of reformist pressures. Ramid's emphasis on public decency goes along the same line of comments that raised the argument of religious opposition, to protect the social identity and decency. The article also focuses on the fourth theme of Social consequences and fear of social backlash, highlighting how a quick shift in laws can lead to clashes over decency violations, which is seen as a significant moral decay of the traditional religious-based Moroccan culture. It is important to note that this specific conservative standpoint strengthens the political criticism of the PJD's broader opposition.

Interestingly, Benadad (2019) connects Ramid's statement to broader purposes than combating moral decay; the statement features PJD as the defenders of traditional values and countering "foreign agendas" that are ruining our society, aligning with 12.5% of the comments that accuse the policymaker of following external pressure. Because the Minister's focus on Moral decay directly relates to moral erosion, though it doesn't specifically address the broader family structure concerns, it aligns with the 25.7% of the comments concerning Moral decay.

To summarize, the article from Le360.ma aligns with several key themes, including religious opposition, social consequences, pro-decriminalization, and political criticism. By clarifying that Article 490 targets public acts, the Minister's statement highlights the distinction between the fear of public backlash and broader moral decay; this thematic overlap reinforces the PJD's position as opponents of the reformists. Ramid's linking of the application of Article 490 to public decency suggests that there is a form of tolerance of private relations, which can reduce disproportionate legal impacts on women.

b- Taboo and the politics behind Decriminalization

Constitutional and legal reforms are rarely neutral, as they are often presented as a "middle ground" to effectively reduce political polarization and adapt the legal framework to the social fabric. However, these reforms are typically driven by the economic, ideological, and cultural interests of those in power, resulting in a structural division that extends beyond political differences (McCarty, 2011). Decriminalization reforms are no different from other legal reforms worldwide. In an online press article by Atti (2023) headlined "*Morocco: ending ban on extramarital relationships divides politicians*" on The New Arab, the tension between conservative and progressive parties is highly evident, since the controversial announcement triggered a widespread division among the country's political elite that led to a harsh confrontation between the Islamist Development party's (PJD) leader Abdelilah Benkirane who publicly accused the minister "Ouahbi" of "*prioritizing immoral*" over dealing with pressing national issues. Ouahbi, on the other hand, retorted with a sarcastic reference to an earlier scandal from 2016 where a PJD-linked leaders were caught in an extramarital affair on a Casablanca beach. This confrontation goes deeper than the superficial meaning of words exchanged, since the beach scandal undermines PJD's "superior" stance as a moral authority, revealing previously mentioned double standards in enforcing Islamic laws. Ouahbi's response highlights a different point, also mentioned in the article, which is the fact that elites often evade the consequences of the 490 articles. This confrontation, in addition to the reform, has revived the popularity of Minister Ouahbi, who granted the ruling coalition (270 seats) in the parliament, who support reforms, while the weakened PJD (13 seats) leads Islamic conservative opposition.

All in all, Atti (2023) acknowledges the efforts made by NGOs like "Moroccan outlaws" to support the underprivileged classes and individuals who are disproportionately harmed by the criminalization of consensual relations. This came to light after the prosecution of the previously mentioned case of Hajar Raissouni, who was one of the leading figures in the battle against Article 490. This shows that the current law prioritizes "morality over justice".

The previous discussion was an extension of a broader social theme of "taboo" as Bouanani (2021) called it in a press article headlined "*Morocco: Sex outside marriage, a taboo subject that promises to spice up the legislative elections*", the article deals with the Article 490 of Morocco's penal code that criminalizes consensual extramarital relations with 1-2 years in prison, as previously discussed. Bouanani (2021) presents the various existing perspectives, highlighting the opinions of both supporters and opponents of decriminalization, and discusses how it affects underprivileged members, especially women, referring back to the case of Hajar Raissouni, which catalyzed activism among outlaws. However, in the article's highlighting of the opponents of Article 490, it is argued that this specific law is used to police morality to affect women and the underprivileged minorities, while encouraging social hypocrisy. While premarital relations are widespread, they remain legally punishable, creating a chilling effect on individual freedoms and social justice.

Politically, parties have largely avoided taking firm stances concerning this matter, especially in the period leading up to the elections, for fear of the risk of losing votes. Even progressive parties like PPS (Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme- Party of Progress and Socialism) express cautious support without affirming their stance for this specific reform, but framing it within broader penal code changes. Meanwhile, the Islamist PJD (Parti de la Justice et du Développement - Justice and Development Party) opposes any Decriminalization, despite internal contradictions and scandals involving their members, as mentioned by Atti (2023).

The Article by Bouanani (2021) tackled several themes related to decriminalization, including the theme of “conservative vs. progressive,” which is a recurring theme in the discussion of the issue. Bouanani (2021) vividly illustrates the tension between traditionalist parties and modernist voices. While progressive figures take a stance favoring the Decriminalization and frame it as a human rights issue, Islamic parties refuse and resist change, highlighting it as an immoral threat to the Moroccan conservative identity. However, this political divide doesn't honestly represent the parties' honest stances of their members. Since PJD leaders publicly condemn extramarital relations but privately face scandals (beach affair, minister's resignation), this has weakened their moral authority.

Another recurrent theme that was in Bouanani's (2021) writings is the disparities between the legal and social spheres, since there were around 15192 convictions done in 2019 under Article 490, disproportionately targeting women and the poor, and turning victims into criminals as judged by society. However, the article also argues that the law is unevenly applied, since it is “*flouted daily, but authorities refuse to acknowledge it.*” Still, the law doesn't apply to the elites who have enough resources to avoid punishment and can carry on their sexual lives privately, which causes a form of social and class injustice towards the underprivileged.

The tone of the article is a journalist's tone, trying to be fact-based but at the same time critical of the current situation, trying to show the existing hypocrisy through juxtapositions like PJD's rhetoric and their scandals. Interestingly, the article had an activist undertone since it contained quotes from *Moroccan Outlaws* and its members, who have progressive ideas. This expresses a sort of irony in highlighting social and political contradictions, as when the author called PJD “moral guardians”.

To sum up, Bouanani's (2021) article “*Morocco: Sex outside marriage, a taboo subject that promises to spice up the legislative elections*” shows a systemic crisis, which expresses how the laws are upheld for political hegemony, not morality. Since the laws highly impact the underprivileged entities, while elites have the advantage in breaking the law and not facing any consequences. Secondly, the article sheds light on the fractured society among activists and conservatives, elites and marginalized, progressives and fundamentalists, all for the sake of a path forward that serves the complex social fabric. Finally, the article shows that the path forward requires coalition-building between progressives, Muslims, and secular parties without any harm to anyone's ideology, allowing civil society to play a leading role in advancing the conversation when formal political institutions remain silent or complicit.

c- Human rights in Morocco, navigating between traditions and reforms

Morocco has shown a strong commitment to international human rights standards through ratifying all nine core UN human rights treaties. Since the country joined the International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in 1970, it has also ratified both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1979 (Interministerial Delegation for Human Rights, 2025). One of the highlights of Morocco's commitment to human rights was the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention Against Torture (CAT) in 1993, followed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the International Convention on Migrant Worker's Rights (ICRMW) in the same year (Interministerial Delegation for Human Rights, 2025). Later commitments include the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2009, the International Convention for Protection from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) in 2013, and key optional protocols - notably the 2022 accessions to the CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) Optional Protocol and First Optional Protocol to the Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). These ratifications bind Morocco to international standards of protection against racial discrimination, child exploitation, disability exclusion, torture, and gender inequality (*Morocco's Universal Periodic Review: How Human Rights Have Declined Over the Past Five Years* | MENA Rights Group, 2022).

Interestingly, the disparities between reality and law continue. In an article by Naim (2025) in Morocco World News, headlined “*Morocco Struggles at 137th Place in 2025 Gender Equality Rankings*,” several studies are mentioned (World Economic Forum, 2025, as cited in Naim, 2025) that dealt with the implications of the ratified treaties and the progress regarding the gender gap. Thus, the Global Gap Report ranked Morocco 137th globally, in addition to 143rd ranking in economic participation and 136th in health. This highlights severe gender disparities, as in Article 490, which criminalizes consensual extramarital

relations, making women more vulnerable to abuse and target of social stigma. As Naim (2025) states, “You can’t claim to protect ‘morality’ while ranking 143rd in economic equality. The data proves Article 490 isn’t about religion—it’s about control.”

The article by Naim (2025) in Morocco World News, like the previous newspaper articles, takes a secular progressive stance since the tone and the structure of the argument lean towards criticizing gender inequality, by mentioning cases where women were subjected to severe harm legally. In addition, Naim (2025) praises higher-ranked countries without acknowledging either the efforts of the Moroccan legal authorities or the alternative models of gender equality that coexist with religious norms. Thus, Naim (2025)’s lack of mention of the religious/cultural perspectives aligns with the voices pushing for the reform without exploring how Muslim-Majority countries deal with gender gaps without fully secularizing.

To sum up, Morocco’s 137th global gender gap ranking and 143rd place in economic participation, in addition to the 136th ranking in health, show how laws like Article 490 criminalize consensual extramarital relations under the umbrella of morality. Naim (2025) voiced several progressive thoughts on how the existence of this law, in addition to the poor ranking in economic participation and health, hurts women disproportionately by potentially trapping them in abusive relationships due to economic dependence and denial of healthcare access. However, Naim’s (2025) article lacks nuance by ignoring Morocco’s efforts to create a gender-equal environment with steps like the 2004 Family Code reform and the work through the interpretations that could bring a blend of secular reforms along with Sharia’s laws, mirroring successful countries such as the United Arab Emirates. This shows that true progress is not limited to the repeal of Article 490, but it starts with addressing the intersecting crisis of healthcare and education gaps between rural and urban areas, in addition to the political underrepresentation that sustains patriarchal control. Secularism is not the only way to that, but Islam itself mandates privacy and dignity to all human beings equally.

With all the progress that Morocco has made, and all the efforts to satisfy different social parties, in addition to the vast effort made by governmental institutions to balance the reform with traditional values and views, Morocco still suffers from stereotypes that impact the global involvement in human rights. An article by García (2025) titled “*Morocco suffers from stereotypes that damage its image*” reports on an international journalism meeting held in Dakhla, Morocco, to discuss the Complementarity between Quality Journalism and Media Education. The meeting convened several global journalists, academics, and experts in various fields. The meeting mainly focused on misinformation in the media, stereotypes and cultural representations, media challenges, and the regional context.

The participants expressed several concerns regarding the amount of misinformation that promotes prejudice and a lack of understanding of the country’s complex social fabric. This leads to vast gaps between reality and media portrayals, as it reinforces negative stereotypes among the population and media audiences. This form of media portrayal of Moroccan efforts towards progressiveness deprives the country of authentic representation and augments the existing social stigma, especially to women, normalizing gender inequality as seen in Morocco’s 137th ranking on the Global Gender Gap Report, as discussed earlier. Since the stereotypical image of the media always puts women as the subject of oppression, which overlooks the cultural complexities impacting the perception of laws like Article 490. The law’s impact can be crucial, but the amplification through the media makes it harder to promote a balanced view of gender equality (VanderMeulen, 2024). Thus, the Dakhla meeting reported in the article (García, 2025) emphasized ethical journalism principles such as dignity, privacy, and transparency to combat discriminatory discourse, in addition to quality journalism that sheds light on the contradictions between CEDAW and the existing law that violates international standards. García (2025) advocates for intercultural dialogue to foster mutual understanding and counter clichés. Since it can serve as a medium between conservative and reformist perspectives to bridge divides to repeal Article 490, to align with CEDAW without upsetting the conservative basis.

To summarize, despite the country’s significant legal and social reforms and the delicate efforts to balance traditional values with holistic progressive changes, it continues to grapple with extremely damaging international stereotypes that distort the main human rights narratives. García’s (2025) documentation of the conference sheds light on the disconnection between the “reductive media portrayals” and Moroccan reality, harming gender equality efforts in the long term, as seen in the 137th Global Gender Gap ranking, including ongoing issues like Article 490. The conference report contained a great emphasis on ethical journalism standards in order to bridge the misrepresentational gap to foster an understanding between conservative and reformist perspectives while aligning with domestic laws like Article 490, with international commitments such as CEDAW. An approach that can offer a path for progress while respecting Morocco’s cultural framework beyond stereotypes and misrepresentation.

d- Morocco’s global image and the reforms

The discussion regarding the country’s stance on the application of human rights is not only limited by local media, especially when the local articles are criticizing the situation of the Morocco in fully integrating human rights in the legal reforms such as Naim (2025), and the struggle surrounding portraying Morocco through stereotypes that harms its image, as in (García, 2025).

The externally produced image of the country can be harmed through the systemic production of stereotypes that do not capture the authentic reality of the country's struggle, and this is discussed by Haddad et al. (2025) in an article headlined "*Morophobia, Orientalism, or obsession? Morocco through interested eyes*," published Atalayar Between Two Shores online newspaper, Haddad et al. (2025) show criticizes the international media framing of Morocco as an authoritarian and untrustworthy country labeling it "Morophobia". The author argues that Morocco's representation within the Western media is highly overshadowed by double standards that do not replicate the efforts taken to balance the reforms with the local culture. This amplifies the far-right rhetoric in Western countries and undermines trust, particularly in Spain. However, the article calls for a balanced, realistic, and context-driven view of Morocco's actions to counter fixed stereotypes and foster understanding.

The article's themes strongly align with the themes from the primary data from the comments on the YouTube video by GOUD TV (2023), since political criticism was strongly present in the discourse of Haddad et al. (2025), as it accuses the international media and commentators of perpetuating a narrative that undermines the country's efforts to a progressive law, including the reforms, labelling the state as manipulative and insincere. Since the critics frame Morocco as "ruled by the wrath of the palace" (Haddad et al. 2025), echoing the 12.5% YouTube comments accusing policymakers of serving foreign agendas. Thus, this intensive foreign critique complicates domestic reforms, as it takes a "superior" position in interfering in the country's efforts without corresponding to the local socio-cultural context of the country. The article adds an international dimension to the theme of political criticism, showing how skeptical global perceptions can amplify tensions between conflicting parts of a society (e.g., conservatives against progressives), which can harm the country's global image and power.

The "Morophobic" views and media perceptions on the country's internal feuds regarding the reforms feed far-right rhetoric in Spain, undermining tolerance and coexistence. This directly connects to the social consequences theme (approx. 22.5% of the comments), particularly the comments regarding the fear of backlash from conservative groups, which can contribute to the creation of a great amount of resistance to progressive reforms like Article 490's decriminalization, reinforcing negative stereotypes regarding the rigidity of Moroccan culture.

Haddad et al. (2025) do not address Article 490 reforms directly, but the article called for a balanced, honest, and informed reading of Morocco's reforms, supporting the 22,7% of the comments that were pro-Decriminalization by advocating the country's progressive efforts, criticizing the "traditional" closeness that is portrayed upon the Moroccans' image, which includes moving toward decriminalizing consensual relations. This strengthens the pro-decriminalization opinion, as the reforms are seen as part of Morocco's modernization, countering stereotypes of stagnation, exoticism, and rigidity.

The article's critique of "Orientalism" and stereotypes of Morocco as unchanging indirectly relates to the religious opposition and moral decay concerns raised by the 39,3% and 25,7% of the comments. Especially that these themes often frame these legal reforms as a threat to the classic Moroccan-Islamic values. That's why the article's critique of the "orientalist" view of the country comes to highlights the complexity of the social fabric of the country. However, the article challenges the narrative of Morocco as static, the article questioning the rhetoric that opposes the reforms on religious grounds, providing a meta-perspective, and criticizing how international narratives amplify domestic fears of moral erosion without understanding the complexities behind the reforms.

All in all, Haddad et al. (2025), in an article published by Atalayar Between Two Shores, tackle the negative portrayal of Morocco in international media outlets as authoritarian and untrustworthy, terming this bias as "Morophobia". Haddad et al. (2025) expose media double standards in overshadowing Morocco's reform efforts, amplifying far-right rhetoric in Spain, and undermining trust. That's why the article calls for a balanced and context-driven view that can alter those stereotypes and recognize Morocco's efforts for modernization. The article aligns with themes of political criticism, social consequences, pro-decriminalization, and indirectly religious opposition from YouTube comments of the primary data by GOUD TV (2023), highlighting how global perceptions can complicate and amply conflicts when it comes to sensitive reforms like Article 490's decriminalization.

Discussion

The study explores the public opinion surrounding the decriminalization of consensual relations between adults and how it is manifested in the public media. This contemporary debate on digital platforms reveals how Moroccans frame the issue from different perspectives, including divinity, human rights, and gender discussions. This demonstrates the authentic opinions of the public and the role of the press in either amplifying resistance or advocating for reform. The digital sphere has fundamentally reshaped and exposed the existing contradictions within the unresolved tension. This discussion synthesizes the historical trajectory illustrated in the literature with the dynamics of the current digital debate to answer the core research questions.

1. How do Moroccans oppose or support the reforms regarding the decriminalization of consensual relations on digital platforms?

The findings from the digital platforms illustrate polarized public reactions as supporters frame decriminalization as a matter of individual liberty and human rights, and an intentional harm for women who are directly harmed by the law, which goes against the ratified human rights treaties, such as the *Text of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (n.d) and aligns with the existing literature that highlights the proportional harm of women's individual rights such as Kafker (2020). In addition, this pro-decriminalization stance is bolstered by progressive media, such as Sana-Elouazi's (2018) article, which explicitly calls for individual freedoms and bodily autonomy and sees that legal reforms should be the main concern of Moroccans. This also aligns with Idrissi (2021), who notes the importance of the Moroccan constitution's alignment with the global conventions, echoing the 22,7% of comments that favor the reform as "natural" and "necessary". Yet, support in comments remains a minority amid religious dominance.

Moroccans express opposition to Article 490's decriminalization sentimentally, framing the issue through cultural and religious lenses. This mirrors the literature around the identity of Moroccans and their attachment to their religious roots, where 98% of Moroccans identify as Muslim (Maddy-Weitzman, 2005). This leads the Moroccans to argue for the application of a total Islamic law, "Sharia" (Centre for Public Impact, 2024). This perception of the law is promoted by the Islamist groups, who view the laws as the last red line that protects the Islamic identity. The comments show how the opposition to decriminalization rhetoric frames itself as the "real nationalist" and sees any form of reform that does not align with Sharia as a surrender to the colonial ideological invasion, referencing back to the Quranic verses that forbid consensual relations and label it as "zina" (fornication). Echoing the conservative narrative, certain press articles reinforce the opposition, such as Howya Press (2023) and Benadad (2019), who condemn apostasy and align with the comments, seeing the reform as a form of moral decay and a threat to the classic family structures, aligning with 25.7% of the comments expressing fears of moral decay and aligning with Fauster (2014).

2. What role do gender, religion, and human rights arguments play in shaping the debate?

Gender is central to this debate, as the literature shows (El Aji, 2017), how women are the ones who are severely harmed by the criminalization, facing social ostracism, legal prosecution, and social labeling. As the opposition comments confirm the disparity, since many of the commenters highlight the "shame" associated with unmarried mothers who engage in consensual relations, while the male partners are left unaccountable, confirming the literature surrounding the impact of Article 490 on women's reputation and social condemnation, as in Fioole (2021).

Religion plays a pivotal role in shaping the discussion, especially for the opposition, since 39.3% invoked Islamic teachings to reject decriminalization as moral corruption, reinforcing literature on the influence of Islamic teachings and Sharia, as in Idrissi (2021). However, reformists argue that Islam is compatible with dignity, justice, and privacy in personal matters. Showing how opposition uses religion to criminalize women socially, as in Kafker (2020).

Human rights arguments counter the religious arguments by limiting religion to individual freedom and personal choice. As in 22% of the comments, and in media articles such as Terriennes (2023), invoking bodily autonomy and ICCPR privacy rights to challenge religious dogma (Idrissi, 2021). This means that human rights arguments call for universality, as Morocco ratified several human rights conventions to work on the international image while resisting a full domestic application, especially in areas tied to sexuality and family.

3. How do these reforms influence perceptions of Morocco's commitment to human rights in both national and international contexts?

The debate over decriminalization profoundly influences perceptions of Morocco's commitment to human rights on the national and international levels. Domestically, reforms remain perceived as ambivalent due to the complexity of perceptions surrounding the decriminalization. For progressives, the legal change represents the recognition of long-overdue social realities and acknowledges the social double standards signaling toward aligning laws with lived realities. However, conservatives see that reforms are externally imposed, threatening the country's religious and cultural foundations. This ambivalence illustrates what scholars such as Fioole (2021) and El Aji (2018) describe as Morocco's identity struggle between modernity and tradition.

Internationally, Morocco is praised for ratifying all nine core UN human rights treaties (Interministerial Delegation for Human Rights, 2025), committing to universal standards on equality and human rights. While pro-reform media like Sana-Elouazi (2018) and Haddad et al. (2025) argue for the application of the commitment and criticize the stereotypical authoritarianism and "Morophobia" in Western media, which overshadows the progress that Morocco is going through.

Conclusion

The discussion surrounding the decriminalization of consensual relations within the digital sphere shows an interplay of religion, individual freedoms, and both national and international laws. The study highlights the intense polarization among Moroccans' opinions. The analysis of the online comments provides a clear answer to the research question, revealing how the Moroccans vocalize their views on the suggested reforms, with 73,3% of the comments opposing. The opposition is based on religious grounds, framing the reform as a threat to the cultural and religious identity of the Moroccans. This is echoed in the press discourse by conservative outlets such as Howya Press (2023) and Benadad (2019). In contrast, supporters were a minority of 22,7%, advocating for individual freedoms, bodily autonomy, and the application of ratified treaties such as CEDAW and ICCPR. This is an inconsistency between law and reality, as echoed in progressive outlets emphasizing social hypocrisy and the need for reforms, such as Sana-Elouazi (2018) and Terrienes (2023). This conflict creates fruitful material for international misrepresentation to amplify stereotypical images and Morophobia, undermining Morocco's efforts to reform and balance conservative with progressive voices.

The findings show the delicate situation of the country, since the state is trying to balance a progressive law with conservative demands to maintain peaceful discussion among the parties of the conflict. This creates both domestic and international pressures that the state cannot indefinitely ignore. This requires a society-wide discussion that reinterprets the Islamic principles of justice, dignity, and privacy in a way that reflects the lived realities of modern Moroccans.

Funding: This research received no external funding

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment: The author would like to express sincere gratitude to Professor Hamza Bekkaoui for his expert guidance and insightful feedback, which were instrumental in the development of this work. Special thanks are also due to Professor Tayeb Ghourdu for his supervision and for facilitating access to the necessary research materials. Finally, I thank my friends and family for their constant support and encouragement.

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Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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