

by Women's Rights Activist and ENoMW Member
Isma Benboulbah, [@IsmaBlrh](#)

April 2020

My Mother Trained me for a Lockdown

For several weeks now, several European countries have been on lockdown facing the spread of the COVID-19, also known as coronavirus. Fear and anxiety brought out the worst in people (we are all aware of the toilet paper gate!) preparing themselves to stay home by buying weeks of supply and entering a state of unbearable fear. This situation is unprecedented in a peace context and puts millions of people in very personally and economically sensitive situations. As I was thinking about this, far away from my family, I realised that after all these years, my dear mother prepared me for this without even knowing it...

As many of my beloved brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of migrant parents coming to Europe (precisely France in my case) to seek a better future for themselves and their descendants, we were the crash test. The first generation of migrants' children established in Europe. Imbalanced and mismatched between two opposed cultures. But what I wasn't clearly aware of, and that I learned years later, was that the impact of my parents' childhood was style rhyming our lives and determining the education I and my siblings were about to receive.

Colonisation, Decolonisation, War and Independence

Both my parents were born, raised and grew up under the French colonisation of Algeria.

I was raised by History, raised to be aware of injustices, raised by family stories and movies retracing the terrible story of the colonisation of Algeria. Members of my family were tortured and are still living (and surviving) with the consequences of things that happened to them. I can't share more information on that since I wasn't told any of these stories. That is way too hard to remember for them and my parents.

My mother was denied the right to study, as the colonists were threatening safety for young girls in her village. My father studied in a French school. Living under the colonisation was a traumatic life experience and made them survivors, but it is another story to tell. Both are heroes of my life, great models and the people I respect and love most.

For me, colonisation isn't something from the past. It is something that is close to me, close to my history, it happened yesterday. I have an everyday conversation with people who remember it. My parents shared with their children all the stories of this recent past. In this desire to let history live and with the terrible fear that the younger generation will forget about the struggles and sacrifices their elders made for them to be free today. Willing to do good, they also passed on us, colonial trauma and all the lifesaving knowledge they had.

“Why do we need four beans cans? - You never know”

As a kid, I loved going to the grocery store with my parents. I would always discreetly put in our shopping cart books and chocolate they would pretend not to see them while proceeding to the checkout. I'm pretty sure all the habits I have now while shopping, come from these Saturday mornings spent with my parents, at the farmer market and the supermarket. Don't get me wrong, the farmer market was not a fancy place where people would buy their organic vegetables. For us, it was a cheap place to buy fresh vegetables and fruit, but also all the spices and other traditional goods my mom needed to cook tagine, couscous and other dishes I grew up with.

I still know my parent's shopping choreography and am well-aware of their unique ways of wandering the aisles.

Sales section, breakfast, pasta, cans, soaps etc. They would always buy the same items from one Saturday to another and I would ask myself “why are we buying four beans cans ? we didn't have any this week...” witnessing my bored face, my mother would automatically reprimand me with a “we never know, and you would be happy to have them - like what? - insha'Allah nothing, yallah move”. Opening the cupboards at home to put away the things gave us magnificent Tetris skills. I would see this food, but wouldn't ask my parents any questions.

Months of solitude

Similarly, as other children of migrants, every year we used to go for two months in Algeria, and that was hard. Algeria was barely reconstructing itself from the colonisation when it faced a civil war that would change forever the country and its people.

Our holidays were synonyms of moral torture, hours of agony, boredom, inexplicable and impossible sabr* for my sisters and me. As young girls, we weren't allowed to go outside by ourselves; we were always chaperoned. As young teenagers, we weren't allowed to go outside for unnecessary journeys: going to see the family with my parents, going shopping with my parents. And believe me, the hardest part wasn't for us, but for my mother - she had to manage three girls used to freedom and now stuck at home.

No internet, no cellphones, no friends, we spent days watching a telenovelas, playing UNO, creating weird games, enjoying a nap and driving our mother crazy. This exercise was a struggle every year, and we weren't used to it. Not being able to open the curtains, walk outside, meet young people our age, was emotionally hard. And harder for me as I was born at the end of July and never really had a “real birthday party”.

But it was nothing in comparison with what women experienced there. We used to describe our lives in France and were mature about their situations in Algeria. We knew about injustice from growing in a ghetto, and we knew about gender inequality from our holidays in our parents' country of origin.

Our level of awareness about the world was so high, that I like to believe that all the kids like me and my siblings, never really enjoyed a peaceful and lovely childhood.

*patience

Always provide, always anticipate

In my early twenties, I left my parents' house to go and study in Lyon. When I had my first student flat, I went shopping for food and first necessity things. While studying, I surprised myself by automatically buying every Saturday: beans cans, tuna cans, pasta bags, tomato cans etc. This stock helped me several times, at the end of difficult months. But I never made any connexion with my childhood, it was normal for me.

Why would I overthink my way of grocery shopping?

The more I was learning about colonisation through my parents, and specifically my mother, the more I enjoyed looking for educational consequences of her childhood and early life under the French colonisation.

Patience, anticipation, controlling my emotions were the basis of the education my mother gave me growing up.

Worldwide lockdown

March 2020 made history.

I couldn't go back to France to be with my family, travelling was never a solution. My mother's first question was “do you have enough food? do you have food cans?”

Of course I did. I always do. Because “you never know”.

Food is our first thought when it comes to overstepping difficult situations.

Getting bored during this lockdown was the second. And guess what ? My mother and her colonial trauma trained me and my siblings for a terrible situation like this one. When I called my brother telling him about this article, we laughed, and he suddenly stopped and told me “God, Isma, I have beans cans”.

My mother trained me and my siblings for unexpected situations. She made our lives an every day learning experience based on what is now history for us.

An ode to my parents, the strongest and funniest couple in my life.

Stay safe.

Isma Benboulabah, Women's Rights Activist and ENoMW Member