

The *Mouvement de solidarité féminine*: army wives and domesticating the ‘native’

The campaign by the French army for the emancipation of Algerian women offered to displace the ‘traditional’ Muslim family and gender roles by a particular western model of the couple and companionate marriage. It is particularly significant that this model was rarely reflected upon or recognised by the French as a specific cultural and social form, but accepted in an automatic and unquestioning way, as ‘natural’ and proper. It was precisely this unreflective agenda that provided Europeans with the overpowering sense of self-confidence about the inherent superiority of European life-styles that constituted the *mission civilisatrice*. While many of the hard-working and dedicated European women who tended to Algerian babies and women in the *bled* saw their role as bringing humanitarian relief and medicine to a neglected population (treatment of trachoma, inoculation, sterilisation of wounds), such aid was not just about scientific intervention, but was generally an integral part of a wider set of complex values, beliefs and actions that involved an attempt to form Muslim women in a particular mould.

During the last two decades there has been much research on the process of ‘domesticating the empire’, the methods by which British, Dutch, Portuguese and French imperial regimes attempted to intervene in, regulate or remake indigenous family life in its own image.¹ This chapter aims, in part, to investigate the overt and implicit meanings of the model of family life, companionate marriage and gender roles that underpinned the emancipation campaign. The paternalistic origins of domesticity are complex and varied from one colony to another, but one key source of interventionism can be traced back to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in western Europe when social imperialists, eugenicists and welfare reformers, concerned by the ‘racial degeneration’ of the proletariat in urban slums, were concerned to educate working-class women into scientific methods of hygiene, diet, child-care and household management that would guarantee the fitness of infants and husbands.

Intrinsic to social imperialism and Christian welfare was a petit-bourgeois class model of family life that emphasised particular moral and disciplinary virtues, such as cleanliness, teetotalism, saving of money, rational use of limited resources, punctuality and self-help.² The metropolitan model of charitable and state intervention in the sphere of the family could be readily exported and adapted to the colonial context, particularly as the categories of class and 'race' were interchangeable, the European inhabitants of slums being viewed by the middle-class as African savages in urban jungles that required missionary and police intervention. Omnia Shakry has shown how metropolitan nationalist discourses on mothering and child rearing influenced the forms of Egyptian middle-class feminism that emerged in the early twentieth century. Just as with European social imperialism, Egyptian feminists viewed the education of girls and women, the ending of superstitious practices and the inculcation of a science of home-management, hygiene and child-care as a national duty, the key to future progress and eventual independence.³ A similar evolution appeared among Iranian women nationalists: the opening of two girls schools in Tehran was celebrated in 1909 in the following terms: 'in the future, every household is headed by a learned lady who knows household management, child rearing, sewing, cooking and cleaning and from whose breast the milk of love of the homeland will be fed to infants so that they shall be deserving of [national] service and sacrifice'.⁴

By the early 1900s it was a truism throughout the educated classes of the Middle East that the roots of national regeneration lay with the education and modernisation of women, but Algeria followed a very different path until the Second World War. Firstly, Algeria lacked a sufficiently large and dynamic Muslim urban middle class to support an elite women's movement of the kind to be found in Turkey, Egypt and Iran.⁵ The discourse that presented the educated mother as the national saviour was not taken up by Algerian women and made their own, but was captured after the 1920s by the male-dominated *Ulema* which, while acknowledging the importance of the education of girls, generally harnessed this to a conservative defence of Islamic family values. In addition between 1900 and 1945 women in settler society, unlike their metropolitan counterparts, showed very little interest in reaching out a hand to help 'regenerate' or modernise the Algerian family: on the contrary most believed that Muslim women should be left in an uneducated and 'primitive' condition where they offered less of a competitive threat. After 1900 the main drive towards a progressive welfare agenda on Algerian women and the family came not from inside the colony, from settlers or Muslim women, but from metropolitan writers like Georges

Vabran of the *Musée Social* who argued that European women were best suited to take on the difficult task of gaining access to native homes, since 'Only the hand of a woman can lift the veil which protects Muslim women', and to organise lessons in hygiene and home economics.⁶ The French feminist, Hubertine Auclert, who lived in Algeria between 1888 and 1892, also believed that assimilation should be achieved through European women penetrating into the secluded space of the Muslim home so as to offer a progressive cultural model.

However, such reformist ideas appear to have made almost no impact in the first half of the twentieth century, and it was only after the outbreak of the rebellion in 1954 and the arrival of many hundreds of wives of army officers and administrators that this model of female interventionism became dramatically activated. Army wives brought with them a range of experience that encouraged their intervention in an emancipation agenda. Firstly, only the wives of senior officers and certain types of female army personnel (mainly nurses) were allowed to serve with active forces overseas, and it was precisely this category of women who played the key role in forming the MSF. The leaders, Lucienne Salan and Suzanne Massu, had both served as professional nurses in the Resistance,⁷ and belonged to the cohort of young women who before and during the Second World War had participated in the 'home front' training programmes of the *Union des femmes de France*, which included stretcher bearing, automobile driving and mechanics, and defence against gas attack.⁸

After 1945 this experience was carried into the French colonies, most notably during the war in Indochina, where both Massu and Salan had served as military nurses. The French forces in Vietnam developed a programme of welfare work with indigenous women, and after 1954 this experience was brought into Algeria. It was French policy in Africa, Indochina and elsewhere to encourage wives of the military and colonial service to volunteer for welfare work with native women since they had unique access and, surrounded by servants, had the free time to do so.⁹ In Lebanon and Syria during the French mandate the colonial civic order was highly paternalist and the wives of high commissioners, such as Madam Catroux, played a prominent role as the patrons of women's associations and glamorous charity balls, or by visiting hospitals, soup kitchens and clinics.¹⁰ In a strongly hierarchical organisation like that of the French army women, in marrying officers, were as 'incorporated wives', expected to share closely in their husband's occupational identity and culture and in many instances to represent the human face of the military to the outside world through official functions, welfare work and ceremonials.¹¹ The wives of generals and colonels in Algeria,

through charitable work with poor Muslim women and children, were thus fulfilling a traditional function,¹² and the wife of the Algerian governor, as part of her quasi-official functions, would also invite selected wives of the Algerian elite to receptions or undertake various benevolent functions that were well-publicised in the colonial press.¹³ It was this long practice of involvement by colonial and military elites in charitable work, and which typically deployed a discourse of universal sisterhood as wives and mothers, that prepared the ground for the MSF initiative. Although the leaders of the MSF held quite conservative values they were mostly newly arrived in Algeria, did not share the racist attitudes towards Muslim women to be found among the *pièdes-noirs*, and tended to support the bourgeois ideals of the post-Liberation Gaullist women's movement: Lucienne Salan, for example, had close links with Hélène Lefaucheu, the most influential representative of this reformist current.

As we have seen (chapter 3), the events of '13 May' and the successful 'fraternisation' movement in the Forum led within days to a major drive by the joint military-civilian government headed by General Salan to accelerate the emancipation of Muslim women. On the 17 May Suzanne Massu made a radio-appeal to all her European and Algerian 'sisters' that led to the creation of the MSF.¹⁴ The basic idea behind the MSF was that European women should take the initiative in forming hundreds of local clubs or associations which would attract women from the Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities into shared social and cultural activities, reach over religious and political divisions, and unite all women in a common purpose as wives, mothers and agents of progress. Through direct personal contact in local clubs 'backward' native women, it was thought, would emulate or absorb through a kind of osmosis the superior moral and domestic behaviour of Europeans. The hierarchical structure of the new organisation closely matched the system of army ranks so that the position of each member matched the status of their husbands. Both Lucienne Salan and Suzanne Massu, as wives of the top commanders, were addressed directly, and in the media, as 'madame la général' or 'mon commandant', and army wives were keen to assert a 'correct' hierarchy in their own relations, following the dictum 'they carry the stripes of their husbands'.

Although both Salan and Massu claimed that the MSF was a purely voluntary and charitable organisation established through the spontaneous enthusiasm of European women, in reality it was another tool of military operations and mainly funded by the army. The MSF was founded on the secret initiative of the Fifth Bureau as part of its psychological warfare strategy, and a number of army initiatives during

1957 prepared the way for the new organisation. In 1957 the Bureau had already begun to establish local women's circles like one reported in early July: 'a women's circle has been opened in Algiers where Muslims and Christians can freely exchange their points of view so as to know and understand one another better. From these contacts can be drawn precious lessons on the methods to be used to hasten, as smoothly as possible, the emancipation of Algerian women'.¹⁵ Some of the newly founded SAU in Algiers, such as those in the Cité Mahiédine and Belcourt under Captains de Germiny and Bernhardt, began to establish women's clubs during 1957.¹⁶ During this time Suzanne Massu assumed a particularly proactive role in this sphere and, after visiting and studying the work of the *Centres sociaux*, she established welfare assistance for orphaned street boys (*yaouleds*) many of whom were refugees from the war zones in the interior. The first *Centre jeunesse* was established at Bab-el-Oued in March 1957, funded by 20 million francs 'given' by General Massu to his wife, and located in a building and with full-time male personnel supplied by his *État-major*.¹⁷ Suzanne Massu's daily presence, along with the wife of General Navarro, soon attracted a flood of Algerian women who were desperate to obtain information about their husbands, sons or brothers who had 'disappeared' or been arrested by the army during the violent Battle of Algiers. Through this contact the *Centre* quickly developed a role of welfare assistance to women, including the project 'Home knitting' (*tricot à domicile*) through which poor Muslim women earned income through a domestic knitting industry that supplied clothing to various outlets, including department stores. The ambiguity of the altruistic role of Mme Massu was highlighted by the fact that she provided welfare assistance to women and children who were the immediate victims of the massive repression, torture and murder inflicted by the parachutist regiments under the command of her husband.¹⁸

Although General Massu claimed disingenuously, 'No political move lay behind the beginning of this organisation [MSF] which rose in response to a simple human need',¹⁹ there is evidence as to the way in which the Fifth Bureau began to manipulate women's circles to its own ends. In August 1957 Madame Tournemine, the wife of an officer, began to pioneer a women's circle in the small settler township of Héliopolis near Guelma (examined below) and this appeared so successful to the commander of the sector, Colonel Bravelet, that he gave army backing to an experimental action during which Algerian women were summoned by army loudspeaker vehicles and coerced to attend a foundation meeting in the local school-yard. Cinema shows were used to attract them to the weekly meetings and women, he claimed, seemed to

be growing in confidence as shown by rising attendance and a quarter of them unveiled spontaneously during sessions.²⁰

In October 1957 the head of the Fifth Bureau in Constantine reported to Algiers on the activities of Thérèse Godet who, under the aegis of the metropolitan based *Union nationale des associations familiales* (UNAF),²¹ had organised numerous women's groups in *douars* in which European instructors, mainly the daughters of settlers, and Muslim women were trained by Godet as teachers of domestic skills. This project proved so successful that Godet was planning to extend it to the departments of Oran and Algiers. This private initiative, which claimed to be apolitical and non-confessional, was funded by the French UNAF and by small grants from the Prefecture of Constantine, but had no links to the army. The army report went on to recommend that the Constantine organisation be secretly lured into co-operating with the military through the inducement of 20 million francs to finance the cash-strapped programme and to achieve a process of 'convergence': 'We know from a reliable source that the UNAF would agree to discretely link its actions to those of *pacification* and to allow us to exercise an effective control over the political and psychological activities of its Training Centres, if the Civil and Military authorities provide the aid which it needs'.²² That the Fifth Bureau was seeking to manipulate such a prestigious institution as the UNAF indicates the extent to which covert operations was penetrating into the civil sphere of the state.

Thus by the time of the events of '13 May' the army was already well on the way to exploring the potential of women's circles as part of its strategy of contact and intelligence gathering. The radio appeal of Suzanne Massu on 17 May evoked a large response from European women who wished to participate in the exciting 'revolutionary' movement that was unfolding and, with the assistance of Jacqueline de La Hoog, the wife of an oil executive, a foundation meeting was held on 20 May at which 200 welfare assistants were present.²³ The very same day Colonel Goussault sent an urgent telex to the regional army commanders, 'to create immediately women's circles that bring together Europeans and Muslims', which confirms the close links between the Fifth Bureau and the creation of the MSF.²⁴

Within days the nascent MSF was almost wrecked by a power struggle between Suzanne Massu and Lucienne Salan for control of the organisation. Overtly this clash was about military hierarchy and protocol: the imperious Salan, as wife of the head of both the armed forces and government of Algeria, was not prepared to accept a position within the MSF below Massu, the wife of a mere *Général de brigade*.²⁵ Superficially this problem was resolved by the creation of a structure

that placed Salan as president and head of the Central Committee, while Massu was president of one of the three regional committees (Algiers), along with the wives of Generals Réthoré (Oran) and Olié (Constantine). Under the surface the conflict rumbled on until in October 1958 Massu tried to block Salan's attempts to control or interfere with the Algiers regional committee by establishing her own legal statute, for which she was accused by Salan of threatening to split the MSF and creating 'a disastrous malaise among all the women'.²⁶

The dispute between Salan and Massu reflected in part a clash of two strong personalities, but at the same time is revealing of a number of tensions and contradictions within the MSF organisation. Elizabeth Thompson has analysed the way in which a paternalist form of charitable welfare in the Lebanese and Syrian mandates during the 1920s gradually gave way to a 'colonial welfare state' in which Arab citizens no longer received benefits as a 'gift' but as a basic right, providing a powerful impetus to the eventual recognition of full political rights.²⁷ But in Algeria a peculiar hybrid situation continued, a mixing of charitable and state welfare functions, of which the MSF was symptomatic. One of the peculiarities of the situation in Algeria, as General Salan and the army assumed increasing control over civil government, was that the demarcation between military command and budgets and civil rule became increasingly confused and inextricably intertwined. This situation is illustrated most clearly by the mobile welfare teams (EMSI) which were pay-rolled by the civil authority (Prefectures), but being desperately short of funds, of vehicles, buildings and materials were almost totally dependent on the good will of local commanders to make these available. One of the most extraordinary, and under-researched, features of the Algerian War is the way in which all the organisations which worked on the ground to bring welfare to women and children, from the SAS/SAU to the EMSI and MSF, were literally reduced to forms of scavenging and make-shift fixing, to get hold of or commandeer scarce resources from doors and cement, to second-hand clothing, soap, bed linen, tents and food supplies.²⁸ Since, particularly in the *bled*, the army frequently constituted the only meaningful governmental structure on the ground and, with its huge budget allocations, monopolised most resources, the ability of women's welfare organisations to function effectively depended on the skill with which they could gain the patronage of local or centrally placed army commanders.

The wives of the senior generals, and in particular Salan and Massu, were ideally placed to influence their husbands, each of whom directly controlled massive resources on the ground, from army vehicles and drivers to stocks of materials. The ambitious Lucienne Salan had no

hesitation in playing a forward political role in the Algerian crisis and intervened directly to act alongside her husband and to advise him, as head of government, during the events of '13 May'.²⁹ Through this intervention she gained immediate and privileged access to the civil and military apparatus in the General Government which was carefully managed by Jacques de Mari, a senior administrator (*chargée de mission*) in General Salan's cabinet, while de Mari's wife served as the general secretary to Salan as head of the MSF Central Committee. However, Suzanne Massu, who claimed to be 'totally apolitical', was incensed by Lucienne Salan's imperious style of control of the MSF and her diktat as to how all funds were to be spent, including those of the regional Algiers committee that Massu presided over.

This tension led Lucienne Salan, in a rather extraordinary move, to set up a quite separate private bank account for her personal 'social welfare fund' into which she got General Salan's cabinet to divert half of government relief funding. The single biggest government grant to the MSF in November 1958 of 60 million francs came from funds that were allocated in the budget for emergency relief to the poor (Chapters 203–42 of Section D of the Budget), but diverting this from its proper use caused considerable anxiety to the head of the Civil Cabinet, General Hubert, who noted that he was already short of funds to alleviate the desperate situation of the population in *regroupement* camps and the victims of recent catastrophic floods.³⁰ Thirty million francs diverted from the emergency relief fund was thus paid into Lucienne Salan's private account and then disbursed by her, often to needy Europeans as much as to Algerians, according to her own whim and in a way that always presented it to the public as a personal gift (*à titre personnel*) from her private resources.³¹

Salan was thus able to bring to her position as 'first lady' in Algeria a highly paternalistic and traditional style as an aristocratic dispenser of charity. From June to December 1958 she undertook an exhausting itinerary, constantly visiting with a team of assistants and army personnel, schools, hospitals, crèches, SAU centres and women's groups in Algiers or going out on tour into the provinces. Always welcomed in formal ceremonies by local commanders, dignitaries, mayors, their wives and little girls offering bouquets of flowers, Salan confirmed her personal status and power as a benefactor through handing out to poor Algerians an endless stream of blankets, clothing, sweets and foodstuffs.³² But Suzanne Massu, who was described by journalists as the antithesis of the elegant and elitist Salan, always down-to-earth, dressed in a Prunic dress and sandals, had little interest in fashion and was inspired by a more populist approach and a social conscience that was rooted in her

strong Catholic faith.³³ Massu, in a barely disguised and barbed attack on Salan's style of dispensing charity, told the press, 'You know, I am not a "pretty lady", wife of a prefect or colonel, who is going to bring sweets to the ordinary soldiers in the army hospitals. CHARITY, PITY, GIVES ME THE HORRORS!'³⁴

Behind the scenes the differing approaches of Salan and Massu to the work and role of the MSF was fought out over the crucial issue of membership. In the early weeks of the MSF Suzanne Massu had set membership fees of 'adherents' at a nominal 100 Francs, probably to be inclusive of the poorest Algerian women, but Lucienne Salan and her military advisers tried to raise this in July 1958 since, 'we risk being infiltrated by undesirable elements',³⁵ a not ungrounded fear since the FLN had given instructions for its female supporters to infiltrate the women's organisations.³⁶ Despite these differences, however, Suzanne Massu was equally dependent on military aid. She, along with members of the Algiers regional committee, represented a 'counter team' to that of Lucienne Salan, and through the attaché Captain Pasquelin gained access to the resources of General Massu's regional *État-major*. As the latter noted, in spite of the enthusiasm of the MSF women, 'only the army can provide the framework and the "means" to set up such an organisation'.³⁷ Why did the MSF organisers cling on to a style of welfare work that presented a public image of entirely voluntary or charitable assistance to Algerian women, when in reality this was only made possible through army resources and as an extension of the military apparatus? Firstly, most army wives, along with many other women on the colonial side of the conflict, created a protective false consciousness in relation to the violent nature of the war being fought by the French forces. The destructive and inhuman aspects of French intervention, which were there for all to see, were dealt with by a whole complex of psychological tricks, of self-denial and wilful blindness. Here there was a fundamental refusal to acknowledge the possibility of illegal or morally unacceptable forms of army violence and, most crucially, to enter into any debate of the issue: for Suzanne Massu this blocking out was sustained through the myth of a water-tight division between the political sphere, controlled by males, a zone in which she refused to 'intervene', and the autonomous sphere of women's voluntary work inspired by spiritual and Christian values: as such there existed a radical dissociation between the grim reality of the war being waged by the army (and her husband), and her own social work: 'the weapon of us women is the sewing machine'.³⁸ The feminisation of welfare relief, which was expressed by a discourse that emphasised the maternal instincts and self-sacrificing role of European women, a kind of 'Florence Nightingale' symbolism, served a very powerful

propaganda and media role in humanising what was a bloody colonial war. But in order to sustain this image the army was happy to conceal the fact that it funded this welfare work and, through the Fifth Bureau, determined the key propaganda campaigns in which it engaged.

What kind of support did the MSF find among European women as it tried to expand its organisation across Algeria? At the top levels we find that the list of key women involved in the MSF reflected a roll-call of the names of generals and colonels and undoubtedly for any senior army wife *not* to have participated would have been regarded within elite army circles with opprobrium. In late 1958 Lucienne Salan decided to built up her private charitable fund through a standard letter sent to the directors and presidents of all major private companies in Algiers: in this she noted that the movement of '13 May' and 'fraternisation' imposed on them an, 'imperious duty', and 'it is essential that your spouse devotes part of her spare time to a circle of the Action Sociale et de Solidarité Féminine'.³⁹ Non-participation could perhaps be interpreted as a signal of political disaffection from the 'revolutionary' movement and even have had negative implications for their husband's career. But, sometimes we gain a glimpse of women who seem to have got involved with the MSF because of a genuine concern for the plight of Algerian women: for example, Mme Delignette, wife of a doctor in the small township of Rabelais, decided to set up a circle in October 1958 since she had accompanied her husband in his tours of duty in the rural zones and witnessed the terrible poverty and suffering of the Algerian women.⁴⁰ It seems likely that many 'incorporated wives' in Algeria, like those in the British colonies, were glad to throw themselves with energy into welfare work with the 'natives' because of the *ennui* that many of them faced in their daily lives when a supply of low-paid servants alleviated even the need for domestic work, or because they were located in the small townships and army posts of the *bled*.⁴¹

However, given that far more European women in Algeria were of settler rather than metropolitan French origin it was noticeable how far the former were under-represented in the overall MSF organisation. As Captain Bernhardt of the Belcourt SAU noted, after the 'fraternisation' parades, 'the impetus of Muslims towards France has not been matched by the impetus of Europeans towards Muslims. The young women who have responded to the appeal of Madame Massu are the wives of officers and engineers, foreigners to the country. The locals have not responded'.⁴² The EMSI reported frequently on the lack of support for MSF circles: thus from Palestro, '*European women*: one word sums them up – indifference. The emancipation of Muslim women is of absolutely no interest to them'.⁴³ This, as will be seen, was in part because

a significant percentage of colonial-born women came from a 'poor white' or lower-middle class background and had little inspiration to get involved in such an elitist movement as the MLF and, more significantly, because they shared the racial values of a highly segregationist colonial society.⁴⁴ By contrast the 'incorporated wives' of army commanders, colonial officials and businessmen were largely metropolitan French in origin and so, as recent arrivals in Algeria, brought with them into the colony more liberal perceptions of both women's and 'native' rights. The MSF leaders, along with army officers in general, shared a jaundiced view of settlers as racist, egocentric beings who, through their defence of entrenched privileges and a failure to recognise and accept the need for economic and social reform for Algerians, threatened to undermine a progressive agenda that held the only chance of maintaining *Algérie française*.

This is significant since, if we are to understand the values that underlay the model of female Algerian emancipation promulgated by the MSF, it is necessary to look for the origins of this more in the social and political experience of women in mainland France than in the conservative colonial milieu.⁴⁵ There is not space here to give a full analysis of the post-war women's movement in France, but suffice it to say that in general the majority of women active in the MSF were moulded or influenced by a conservative and predominantly Catholic culture that emphasised the 'natural' role of women as mothers, wives and guardians of the home.⁴⁶ The 'familial feminism' sustained by the MSF was one of domesticity (child rearing, cuisine, hygiene) that reflected the contemporary bourgeois ideology in mainland France.⁴⁷

This linkage to the metropolitan context is also shown by the close links that the MSF leadership established with the main women's organisations in France, particularly with the *Conseil national des femmes françaises* (CNFF) and its president, Marie-Hélène Lefauchaux. The CNFF, founded in 1901, federated numerous associations of women's organisations, and represented the opinion of a largely privileged, middle-class constituency which campaigned for a moderate reformist agenda which, after the final winning of the vote in 1944–45, included the advancement of women in numerous domains of education, civic rights, health, family life, employment and political education.⁴⁸ As has been seen (chapter 1), Lefauchaux, in her position as French delegate to the UN's Commission on the Status of Women, had a key role in the international movement for political and legal rights, and as president of the CNFF (1954–64) and of the *Conseil international des femmes* from 1957 to 1963, supported the post-'13 May' campaign for the emancipation of Algerian women. Lucienne Salan corresponded

regularly with Lefauchaux, and the latter welcomed a delegation of twenty Algerian and European girls sent by the MSF to participate in the 14 July parade in Paris, before heading an exchange visit of twenty French girls to Algeria.⁴⁹ The MSF affiliated to the CNFF, and Salan and Lefauchaux liaised on a number of issues, most significantly on the campaign to extend the vote to Algerian Muslim women in the referendum of 28 September 1958. They also, behind the scenes, planned the move to stand three Algerian women in the parliamentary elections of November.⁵⁰ One of those duly elected deputy was Nafissa Sid-Cara, later president of the MSF, who was soon promoted to Secretary of State in the Gaullist government and for whom Lefauchaux acted as *Chef de cabinet* and close collaborator during the meetings of the 1959 commission to revise the personal status law.⁵¹

The role of the MSF in the campaign to extend the vote to Muslim women and to reform the law on personnel status will be explored later (chapter 8): the concluding part of this chapter examines in more detail the local function of the circles and the problems of contact which they faced. By May 1959 the MSF claimed to have organised 438 circles,⁵² but many of those in the *bled*, in the absence of European settlers, had a brief and rudimentary existence or were organised primarily by the EMSI teams (chapter 7). So the effective MSF circles were largely an urban phenomenon, located in the large cities of the northern littoral or in the scatter of smaller provincial centres like Aumale, Bouira and Relizane in which there were enough women, the wives of officers, administrators and professional cadres, to support and sustain the organisation. Three circles, Héliopolis, Rio-Salado and Palissy, for which there exists a rich body of material, have been selected as case-studies to illustrate the inner workings of the local MSF.

An early experiment: the women's circle of Héliopolis, 1957–58

Colonel Bravelet, commander of the Guelma sector and a keen advocate of emancipation, was impressed by the work of Mme Tournemine, the wife of an officer, in creating two circles in the small townships of Héliopolis and Guelaa Bou Sba.⁵³ Just before Tournemine returned to France, Bravelet persuaded her to write down the detail of the methods she had developed between August 1957 and June 1958 to make contact with Muslim women, so that this could serve as a model for future grass-roots action. The document she produced, *Action psychologique féminine*, is interesting for the inside detail it provides of how European women set about the task of establishing contact with Muslim women in the interior, and is revealing of the highly paternalistic and manipulative

attitudes towards those seen as child-like and suggestible creatures who required authoritarian direction.⁵⁴

Tournemine, rather in the way of an amateur ethnologist or missionary, outlined a series of progressive steps by which European women could enter into contact with Algerian women and manipulate and pressurise them to attend regular meetings. Firstly, working either with medical teams or alone, the European was to win the initial trust of native women through providing health care for them and their children, and to gain entry to the jealously guarded private world of the home and family:

Use the occasion of this health care to go to their home, without ever forcing your way into their huts, which they will usually not refuse.

Don't be surprised by anything (the place, smell, filth, darkness, smoke, primitive tools or utensils). Nothing should put you out; copy right away their way of doing things; sit on the ground or on a bench, drink coffee just as it is offered.

Respect their customs and modesty; gently but firmly brush aside their superstitions and their false sense of shame (the dirty amulets of the babies, poultices of rotten leaves on wounds, women refusing to undress for an injection or medical examination, etc.).

During the initial contact in the home the European should consolidate her influence through praise of the women's children, clothes and utensils and by gifts of sugar, coffee, medicines or sweets for the children. *'Before satisfying their heart and soul with kind words and good advice, you must first fill the stomach and flatter the coquetry of the women . . . They really understand nothing except when it concerns their affections, their children, their coquetry or vanity'*. After an initial contact the European should begin to assert a series of escalating demands, the first of which was to insist that women were properly clean and washed before any care was provided. If they should resist they were to be ostracised, *'walk past their hut without stopping, stay deaf to their appeals . . . "I prefer to go to see the neighbour"'*, and if they tried to cheat, *'get very angry'*.

When trust had been established the next step was to gather the women into the first meeting, which needed to be segregated in a closed space if husbands were to allow their wives to attend. The women should be put at their ease by inviting them to breast feed their babies, then speak for ten minutes to express your sincere friendship, explain that meetings were for French women of all faiths to unite, and that we all have much to learn from each other. What particularly intrigued the Algerian women, she noted, was if you talked of your own family and showed personal photographs. The initial meetings would be attended

mainly by older, often widowed women who were able to do so since they presented little threat to deeply held values of honour, and these influential matriarchs should be cultivated so that in time they would permit the young women (a particular goal of action), such as daughters and daughters-in-law to attend, 'while still acting as strict chaperon'.

Particular attention was given by Tournemine to veiling and the tactics for its gradual abandonment. At a first meeting the veil should be allowed to pass, but at the second, 'invite the women to lower their "*haïk*" on the pretext that you cannot recognise them, that you cannot speak to "eyes" but only to "friendly faces". To remain "veiled" is a sign of distrust'. If by the third meeting some continued to wear the *haïk* they were to be ridiculed by the European holding a veil to her own face, or bluntly told that only the very old and sick could do so: 'If one or another persists, pretend not to know her, do not speak to her. She will not resist for long'. Then gradually the women should be persuaded to go as a group unveiled in public and, 'two months later they will find it completely normal to go out into the street unveiled, even on their own'.

Tournemine showed a particular concern, common to the traditions of colonial administration, that the European must always retain psychological mastery and infallibility over the 'native', since any sign of weakness could open a dangerous chink in the armour-plating of French hegemony. Thus the discussions in the circle should appear a free and open dialogue but, in reality, 'you must always dominate, direct the discussion, while seeming not to do so, with much sympathy and understanding'. If the Algerians asked a question she was unable to answer it was imperative not to appear to lie or deceive while remaining in the driving seat, 'say that you are going to look into this question in depth . . . The best means to never find yourself inferior to them is to never lie . . . Appear in their eyes very strong and sure of yourself. Never give the impression of being afraid and, from time to time, set out to prove it . . . do not hesitate to appear very strict on occasions'. For example, it was often difficult to retain order when women pressed around during the distribution of food and clothing, 'call on the soldiers, which is nearly always necessary, and whom they are frightened of'. Until this point in the text the relationship between Tournemine and the Algerians of Héliopolis, for all its patronising force, appears to be an intimate face-to-face encounter between women alone in a courtyard or cactus enclosure, but suddenly we become aware of the wider power relationship and context of this encounter. The authority of Mme Tournemine rested less perhaps, as she claimed, on her strong personality and moral force as an inherently superior European woman and more on the reality of military presence and coercion.

Most of the accounts by European women of their work in the MSF circles or EMSI teams presents a discourse in which their relationship to Algerian ‘sisters’ is an immediate friendly and moral bonding based on a shared universal identity as women and mothers, while the ever-present retinue of army bodyguards and interpreters is not mentioned at all and rendered invisible. Now and again the façade drops to reveal the underlying power relationship, as in an account by the EMSI worker Ginette Thévenin-Copin of passing in the countryside a man riding on a donkey, followed by his exhausted wife on foot carrying a huge load of sticks. ‘I ordered the husband to get off the donkey, freed the women of her heavy load, and advised the husband, who did not seem to appreciate my intervention, to put the pile of wood on the back of the animal’. It seems that the courageous young woman had single-handedly confronted what she called obnoxious ‘ancestral customs’, but then we become aware almost coincidentally of another presence: ‘it was then that the young soldier who was given the order to escort me said, “Pitchounette, perhaps you should not have done that, you have made yourself an enemy”’.⁵⁵ The ‘writing out’ of the military underpinning of MSF actions was necessary to retain the illusion of a humanistic and progressive agenda in which the conversion of Muslim women must appear to be carried out with their full and voluntary assent since coercion would betray the fundamental values to which the civilising mission laid claim.

Evidence of this ambiguity, one that underlay all social welfare during the war, can be found in the confidential reports of Captain Schlumberger who organised a tour by Lucienne Salan through western Algeria in September 1958 to address rallies of both European and Muslim women to found or participate in MSF circles. At each location visited the Fifth Bureau would try and gather as many local Muslim women as possible, and then using loud-speaker lorries attempt to ‘heat up’ (*chauffées*) the enthusiasm of audiences, before they were addressed by Lucienne Salan, followed by distributions of clothing, condensed milk and blankets. Many thousands of these women were located in army resettlement camps and were living in tents. At Marbot Schlumberger noted, ‘A timid welcome. Appearance of poverty and mediocre health conditions – lack of milk and water’; at Pont de Caïd, ‘A hundred women giving a rather strained applause appear anxious: many of these families have been recently subject to *regroupement* and are without milk or food’; at Nedromah, ‘The women appear to be intimidated and frightened’.⁵⁶ The question of the harsh conditions faced by rural women will be explored in more detail in the next chapter, but in relation to the everyday operations of the women’s circles it can be noted that even where European volunteers (or EMSI) were highly dedicated and inspired by genuine and

altruistic concern for the plight of Algerian women the relationship was always embedded in, or underscored by, the more or less visible presence of the colonial power and its armed might.

The MSF circles of Rio-Salado and Palissy

The local circles which have left the most detailed record were located in the Oran region, where the dense settler population in the prosperous, wine-growing areas created optimum conditions for volunteer work by European women in small towns that bore a striking resemblance to the traditional agro-villages of Provence or Languedoc. The following account is based on the circle of Rio-Salado (today El Malah), situated sixty kilometres to the west of Oran, which prided itself on the being the finest in Algeria, and Palissy (Sidi-Khaled), a few miles to the south-west of the garrison town of Sidi-Bel-Abbès, HQ of the Foreign Legion.⁵⁷

Of the two the MSF circle of Rio-Salado operated on the largest and most elaborate scale. At a foundation meeting held in the town hall on 10 June 1958, attended by fifty European women under Mme Rethoré, wife of the General in command of the Oran region and president of the MSF region, a multi-faith CAS was established headed by Odette Bour and three vice-presidents representing the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities. Over the next year, this dynamic and well-endowed group found accommodation first in a temporary building, the children's nursery, and later in a permanent centre that it was able to buy with the assistance of local wine producers.

The CAS quickly set about investigating the social conditions and needs of local Muslim women by sending out teams of volunteers to visit them in their homes. This appears to have been the first time that the women settlers of Rio-Salado, who lived in a highly segregated society, gained direct experience of the mass poverty that existed on their doorstep. Many of the townships that developed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards in the Oran region had a bi-polar structure, with the settlers inhabiting the European administrative and commercial centre, and the Muslim population segregated in peripheral ghettos or shantytowns commonly known as *villages nègres*. From the 1930s onwards, with the deepening crisis of Algerian rural society under the impact of colonialism, many thousands began to migrate to the *villages nègres* to scratch a living as day-labourers, a process that accelerated dramatically during the war.⁵⁸

Although the archives of the Rio-Salado circle make no mention of it, the 'village' of Sidi-Saïd disguised the existence of a *centre de*

regroupement (see chapter 6), into which thousands of peasants from outlying farms had been forced by the army which destroyed their homes.⁵⁹ Michel Launay, who studied the area directly, discovered that within the prosperous wine-growing *arrondissement* of Ain-Témouchent in which Rio-Salado was located, the *colons* faced a problem of labour recruitment or demands for higher wages, which arose from FLN and trade union pressures, including total withdrawal of labour and strikes. The *colons* supported the mass resettlement of outlying peasantry into camps in order to undermine the FLN, and to create huge reserves of cheap labour, 'disciplined' by the army, on the door-step of each European township.⁶⁰ By the later stages of the war, women and children within the camps constituted a particularly large pool of low-waged seasonal labour. Between 1956 and 1960 the French army decimated the population of younger males of working age in the *arrondissement* of Témouchent, some 5,000 men in a total population of 116,000, and this had left an estimated 2,000 to 2,500 widows and many more orphans.⁶¹ The desperately poor women in the camps and 'new villages' like Sidi-Saïd, particularly since their husbands were dead or absent in the FLN, were forced to work, especially during the intense phase of seasonal grape-picking (*vendange*). The *colons* were glad to be able to tap into the pool of female and child labour, especially since they constituted a more docile work force that could be paid below the legal minimum wage for men.⁶²

In October 1958 the Rio-Salado MSF organised one of the numerous petitions sent to de Gaulle for a reform of the law on female personal status (see chapter 8), and among the 837 women who 'signed' it (816 of them by finger-print indicating 97.6 per cent illiteracy), were many from Sidi-Saïd who were categorised as widows and agricultural labourers.⁶³ Launay's study suggests that the desperately poor inhabitants of the 'village' shared a culture of poverty that was marked by the ecstatic rituals, dancing, feasting (*Ouahda*) and hashish smoking of the Sufi and *marabout* sect of the Aïssaoua: forms of populist hysteria and release that tended to oppose the more austere puritanism of the neighbouring *douar* of Messaada, a centre of *Ulema* culture and FLN activism.⁶⁴ The European women of the Rio-Salado Committee, on first 'discovering' the quarter of Sidi-Saïd, inhabited by over 4,000 Muslims located a kilometre from the colonial centre, seem to have been shocked by the conditions which they found: 'During our daily visits to the *douar*, and in the Muslim quartier of the town, we discovered a frightening number of widows or abandoned women each with four or five children in their care'.⁶⁵ The MSF Committee soon began to recognise the crucial need for single Muslim women with children to work, most of them

as agricultural labourers, and to facilitate this established a crèche for 150 children, an initiative which proved especially timely for the grape-picking season. The local *viticulteurs* were generous towards a crèche project that supported their interests as employers by facilitating access to a large pool of cheap female labour, and they provided the funds to buy a permanent building to house it.⁶⁶ But once the intense seasonal need for *vendange* labour was over many women were once again unemployed and, to help alleviate this, the MSF opened a carpet-weaving and ceramics atelier that provided some income for twenty women.⁶⁷ The MSF committee of Palissy was exercised by similar social concerns and its president, Mme Husson, reported the need to:

Get employers to recognise that a minimal basic wage exists (domestic staff) . . . To accept the dignity of each family by guaranteed work for the men, and for widows and abandoned mothers. Improvement of housing conditions, water supply, electricity, and heating. Guarantee of daily work (harvesting, the *vendange*, and pruning vines provide insufficient income).

Overall the MSFs of Rio-Salado and Palissy could do little to ameliorate the fundamental problems of mass underemployment and endemic poverty. The level of job-creation barely scratched the surface: the carpet atelier of Rio-Salado could only employ a tiny fraction, below 2.3 per cent of the 837 women with which they had most contact, while at Palissy the local Foreign Legion battalion provided only intermittent relief work for men on various public works schemes. In addition there is evidence that the call for intervention and reform in the job market, such as respect for a minimum wage, was coming largely from women like Husson who as recent arrivals from France were regarded as outsiders, while the local *pièds-noirs* community was deeply opposed to any move to challenge its entrenched social, economic and political domination.⁶⁸ Settler identity was created and sustained by the founding myth of a heroic ancestry that as pioneers had cleared the ‘uninhabited’ malarial scrublands and swamps of northern Algeria single-handed and transformed it into an agrarian paradise: nothing was owed to the primitive and nomadic Algerian tribes that were incapable of unlocking such wealth.⁶⁹

In Pallisy, after an initial surge in interest, European women quickly dropped away and Husson virtually ended up running the circle single-handed: she noted ‘the lack of European ladies that can serve as instructors is a major deficiency’, while the idea for a crèche had to be abandoned. A collection for second-hand clothing in August so that Muslim children could return to school raised nothing at all, while a further appeal by the Mayor (president of the *délégation spéciale*)

Champtassint, as well as an army loud-speaker lorry, for funds or materials led to 'nothing'. The Europeans of Pallisy appear to have turned their back on the MSF, or treated it with open hostility, and Champtassint, who supported the organisation, advised Husson not to make any further appeals for money or gifts in kind.⁷⁰ The Pallisy MSF would clearly have collapsed without the support of the civilian authorities and the army, which supplied some funds, materials, interpreters, cinema films, EMSI/ASSRA assistants and other back-up.

At Rio-Salado, where the Committee enjoyed greater local backing, a second line of attack on the poverty of women was achieved through a classic, but well-policed, system of charitable relief. European members visited the homes of the indigent on a daily basis and established a dossier (*fiches*) that recorded family information, social and economic position, and cross-checked or verified this with identity cards and their employers: a system that must have caused much apprehension for most Algerians, and certainly for the FLN which, correctly, sensed an extension of army intelligence. The bigger *colon* employers in the Oran region, like the Spanish caciques and latifundia lords of Sicily, held almost feudal powers of granting or withholding employment that created a climate of fear among the 'deferential' workers of the region. In some instances the MSF gave advice to women and directed them towards the social security, doctors or pharmacies, but material aid (wheat, semolina, clothing, milk) was only provided to 'non-indigent' women facing a temporary need. This would suggest that the Committee operated a screening policy through which, as in Victorian England, only the 'deserving poor' were to be helped, those Algerians that had the moral qualities to achieve self-improvement.⁷¹ Most astonishing of all was a report of the MSF that the main beneficiaries of welfare were not Muslim women at all, but Europeans who received 80 per cent of all aid.

The standard activity which most of the circles across Algeria organised consisted of *ouvroirs*, sewing and knitting groups, in which women of the three communities could converse and break down the barriers of segregation, while at the same time engaging in useful employment (see illustration 7, p. 166). At Rio-Salado the women, 'while knitting', exchanged cooking recipes, while building trust between 'women of different races and customs'. As has been seen for Héliopolis, a central idea was that Algerian women would absorb a progressive model of behaviour from their western 'sisters': the opening of the Pallisy *ouvroir* in the village hall was attended by 130 Muslim women with their babies where, 'A dozen European ladies made good use of their experience and generously dispensed useful advice to their Muslim sisters'. The organisers tried to increase attendance at such meetings through various forms

of light entertainment, including cinema shows provided by the army, singing of popular songs, or listening to the radio or carefully selected gramophone records (at Pallisy carefully selected ‘records of children’s songs’). A key objective was to reach out to the generation of girls or young women who were seen as more receptive to western influences. But as reported in Héliopolis and other locations, the MSF encountered initial problems with sessions being monopolised by more conservative and older women in order to protect the seclusion and honour of the young. At Pallisy it was reported that matriarchs, ‘come along for the pleasure of getting out, but refuse to learn to sew. It seems they wish to represent the family so that the girls, young women or daughters-in-law remain at home’.

At Rio-Salado a basic schooling was established for 150 young women who were taught some French and arithmetic, but most significantly the essential European values of domesticity, hygiene and morality (politeness, correct behaviour). ‘The less evolved benefit from advice relating to domestic life (lessons in cookery, cutting, dress-making, knitting)’, and making clothing, ‘a skirt, a baby vest, a brassiere’⁷² or ‘dress’, was itself a means to draw girls away from indigenous towards western styles of dress. The national woman’s magazine of the MSF, *Femmes nouvelles*, contained endless images of the latest Paris fashions, such as ‘the Winter 58 collection’,⁷³ but instead of such styles being beyond the reach of its Muslim readers, they were encouraged to make their own dresses using the cut-out patterns provided in the magazine.⁷⁴ At Rio-Salado the success of this process of modernisation was quickly seen in a transformation of everyday comportment, in ‘the good dress-sense of the young girls’, ‘their correct welcome, the care taken with their cleanliness, even their coquetry’, and their personal hygiene (cleaning teeth daily) and table manners. The *Femmes nouvelles* conveyed a similar message on how young women should learn ‘the secrets of elegance’ by knowing not only how to choose a dress or hat and appear chic, but also to learn an appropriate body language, how to stand properly or sit elegantly not with legs apart: ‘an art in itself’. At Pallisy the MSF entertained identical objectives through, ‘lessons in hygiene, cleanliness, baby-care, morality, solidarity, the sense of duty, family life, and life in society’. Trivial as much of this may seem, as Norbert Elias and others have shown, the historical development of manners has been the very hallmark of the European concept of *civilité* or ‘civilisation’ (eating with knives and forks, use of the handkerchief) as opposed to the uncouth world of the barbarian or savage.⁷⁵ The MSF circles were thus engaged not only in attempts to remove the veil, but also in the far more complex processes of inculcating a total *savoir faire*, a set of

manners and cultural bearings that revealed an assimilationist rather than integrationist agenda.

A second type of MSF activity, sometimes referred to as *causeries*, consisted of much larger weekly public meetings of women (and men separately), in which the presidents of the local circles, usually assisted by a team of interpreters, EMSI or local dignitaries such as the Mayor or army commander, addressed wider and more political issues, such as anti-veiling, the campaign for women to register and vote in the 28 September referendum, and for reform of the law of personal status. An unusually detailed and revealing insight into the political operations of the Pallisy MSF is provided by a meticulous daily log, significantly given the military title of a *Journal de marche*, kept by its President Madame J. Husson who, like Massu and Salan, had served in 1944 as an army nurse or PFAT. Husson constantly liaised with the commanding officers of the Foreign Legion based a few miles away in Sidi-Bel-Abbès. Much of this routine exchange concerned quite pragmatic issues of material or organisational aid for the cash-strapped MSF, such as the provision of a radio set or gramophone, old army shirts to be reused in the *ouvroir*, cinema projections, supply of army interpreters and small cash grants.

Husson's journal provides evidence of the way in which the local Fifth Bureau exercised a direct control over the political activities and themes of the MSF. On 1 September Husson contacted Commander Hallo to gain clarification of how the MSF Committee was to receive its instructions under the new post-coup 'revolutionary' framework of the CSP. Hallo replied that the local CSP, which should operate in parallel with the MSF Committee and support the same aims, normally received its orders from the Fifth Bureau, and a female member of the CSP should be delegated to regularly attend meetings of the Pallisy committee and serve as liaison. In reality most of the liaison seems to have been undertaken by Sous-Lieutenant Collin of the Fifth Bureau who was delegated to this role, and one archival photograph shows Collin deep in conversation with Husson, the Mayor Champtassint and his wife.⁷⁶ For the most important political gatherings a senior officer, usually Commandant Grandidier, would share the MSF platform at public meetings and address the Algerian women. Husson, who could only address the Algerian women in French, was always accompanied by an official translator, and in most instances this was again a service provided by the Fifth Bureau (Lieutenant Roche).

In the *Journal de marche* Husson reports on an important foundation meeting on 6 August to persuade the Algerians of Pallisy to support the infant MSF. This appeal, which was organised by the Fifth Bureau, took place in separate sessions for men and women. Because adult males

exercised close control over the behaviour and honour of women, and whether they would be allowed to attend MSF meetings, it was of crucial importance to win them over first.⁷⁷ At 11 am on the 6 August the men, first drawn in by a short film, were then addressed by Husson: 'My friends, I thank you all for agreeing to help me in the difficult task that has been entrusted to me', and afterwards, she claimed, they applauded and pressed round to 'show their joy at having been understood'. A Fifth Bureau officer then replied in Arabic to questions the men might have about wages, social security payments and other issues. Husson then welcomed the Algerian women in a separate session at 5 pm:

I love you all.

I wish to help you progress.

I wish to turn you into complete women, truly happy and new women.

I am your sister, accept me! And love me like I love you already.

She was able to reassure them, following the meeting of that morning, that husbands and brothers would be supportive ('they all understood me'), and then tea was served for everyone to get to know each other.

In a *causerie* on 4 September Husson spoke at length on the topic of the veil. By then, she claimed, twenty young local girls had shown a deep desire for 'evolution' and demonstrated this by permanently discarding their veils and handing them to Husson for safe keeping in the town hall, possibly a tactic encouraged to prevent families forcing them to retain the *haïk*. Husson praised this act of courage and asked all the girls and mothers present to do likewise in a collective unveiling. The president then supported this by arguing that neither the Koran nor Islamic religious leaders insisted on the wearing of the veil, and that Algeria, compared to Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and other Muslim states, was the last bastion of this practice. There was no shame in showing one's face,⁷⁸ and in moving into the public sphere to assert their rights as Frenchwomen, just as did the wife of President Coty who despite her public functions remained in high esteem.

It is difficult to penetrate through the glowing and self-congratulatory discourse of Husson, as of all leading figures in the MSF movement, to gauge how Algerian women participants viewed the circles or whether their ideas and behaviour were modified.⁷⁹ But at an important indoor meeting of the MSF at Palissy on 25 September to organise the imminent referendum vote a photo-journalist on the stage clearly caught the segregated audience of unveiled women by surprise and the instinctive reaction shown to the camera flash by the rows of startled and anxious women, apart from the normally unveiled and smiling young girls, was to swing in unison away from the camera and to clutch their *haïks* to

their face. This would suggest that the MSF in Pallisy made little, if any, impact on the wearing of the veil. But in addition there is evidence of political resistance by Muslim women to MSF action in the townships of Rio-Salado and Pallisy.

In May 1959 General Gambiez, commander of the Oran region, after a visit to the MSF of Rio-Salado, supported the request of Mme Bour for an increase in the government grant from half to twenty million francs: 'a rich work of fraternity has been pursued in depth . . . and in this radiant commune there is no longer any place for the OPA'.⁸⁰ While it was the case that 'pacification' was most successful in Oranie and provided the best conditions in Algeria for European women to organise the circles, even in these areas of massive settler presence the Algerian population showed signs of deep, if *attentiste* resistance. Bour reported that due to the 'events' her group was not able to extend its activities beyond the town suburbs, suggesting a degree of insecurity in the surrounding countryside. FLN resistance simmered in the area and undoubtedly influenced local Muslim women, most of whom never attended any form of meeting, or, even when they did, could be secretly opposed to its objectives (as with the older women who attended to impede or control its effects), or drawn by a variety of motives from an interest in film shows, to the handouts of semolina and clothing. The FLN had a real, if clandestine, presence inside the township: for example, Husson reported in August 1958 that the local mosque had been closed down by the army for several months as a 'disciplinary sanction'. Two soldiers were usually placed to guard MSF Committee meetings, and on the eve of the important referendum vote on 28 September the FLN carried out an attack in which one sentry was severely wounded. At a big meeting of the MSF on 9 October the commander asked the Algerian women if they had any requests, and one had the courage to ask that General de Gaulle should liberate their men who had been arrested two days earlier in relation to the attack. The commander, clearly angered by this, and responding in 'severe terms', remarked that three or four terrorists had penetrated into Pallisy, 'guided by the inhabitants of the village', and several suspects had been arrested and 'confessed'. The women had voted in the referendum to stay French, but this was, he said, in contradiction with the attack: 'If you ask to stay French, you do not become accomplices of the bandits (*fellaghas*); you do not engage in a double game'. In the referendum the 234 Algerian women of Pallisy who had voted returned a 100 per cent 'Yes' for de Gaulle, but concealed beneath this apparently total and unanimous support for the French government one has the sense of a deep, if usually un-stated, hostility to the MSF which, as will be seen later, only began to surface openly from the end of 1959.

In conclusion it can be noted that the comparative study of empire tends to show that there was nothing particularly unusual about the French approach to carrying out welfare work with indigenous Algerian women during the period from 1957 to 1962. To date historians have examined most closely the situation in the British African colonies, and this work shows a range of welfare interventions by European women from the 1920s onwards that included, for example, training in mothercraft, hygiene, diet and domestic sciences that bore a striking resemblance to the MSF and EMSI initiatives.⁸¹ In the case of the British colonies like Nigeria and Ghana, in which there was a relatively peaceful transition to independence, feminist historians have, in spite of their strictures about Eurocentric interventions in ‘native’ domestic culture, provided a sympathetic and positive picture of the considerable contribution that European women made towards achieving progress for women and preparation for a post-independence society. The role of metropolitan French women in the running of the colonial empire has received little attention from historians,⁸² but as has been seen the tragedy in Algeria arose from the fact that similar forms of welfare intervention that in a ‘normal’ peacetime context might have been welcomed by all sides as part of a progressive agenda, was radically distorted and ‘corrupted’ by the military who hitched it to the purposes of ‘pacification’. A few professional women social workers, as in the *Centres sociaux*, resisted this perversion of the welfare function, but more generally European women seem to have leant themselves to this process. As we will see in chapters 6 and 7, the irresolvable contradictions between emancipation and military violence became most evident in the work of the women’s welfare teams, the EMSI, in the peasant and nomadic societies located in the vast and sparsely inhabited interior.

Notes

- 1 There is a considerable and growing literature on imperialism and domesticity: for an introduction to this field and bibliography see Karen Tranberg Hansen (ed.), *African Encounters with Domesticity* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism. Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992); Frederick Cooper and Laura Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Clancy-Smith and Gouda (eds), *Domesticating the Empire*; Margaret Strobel, ‘Gender, Sex and Empire’, in Michael Adas (ed.), *Islamic and European Expansion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 345–75.

- 2 There is a large literature on this subject, but for Britain see especially Gareth Stedman Jones, *Oucast London. A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1976 edn), chapter 18; Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop*, 5 (1978), 9–65; for France, Janet R. Horne, 'In Pursuit of Greater France: Visions of Empire Among Musée Social Reformers, 1894–1931', in Clancy-Smith and Gouda (eds), *Domesticating the Empire*, 21–42.
- 3 Omnia Shakry, 'Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt', in Abu-Lughod (ed.), *Remaking Women*, 128–69.
- 4 Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 195; also 'Crafting an Educated Housewife in Iran', in Abu-Lughod (ed.), *Remaking Women*, 91–125.
- 5 It has often been claimed that between the late nineteenth century and the Second World War an indigenous tradition of Arab intellectual life was moribund in Algeria, a view that has been challenged by McDougall, *History*, and Mostefa Lacheraf, *Des noms et des lieux. Mémoires d'une Algérie oubliée* (Algiers: Casbah Éditions, 1998). While the field has been under-researched, it would appear that Algerian women played little part in an Arab-language culture that was monopolised by men, and that those few women who were able to gain a secondary or further education were drawn more entirely into a francophone culture.
- 6 Georges Vabran, *La Femme française et la femme musulmane en Tunisie*, Musée Social, 1913, cited in Horne, 'In Pursuit', 38.
- 7 CAOM 13CAB61, in an undated manifesto to promote her claim to head the MSF, Lucienne Salan referred to her Resistance record as, 'Senior nurse (wounded at Montbéliard)'; Massu in a similar manifesto claimed, 'Having had the honour of leading many women in wartime, both in the Leclerc Division during the campaign in France, as well as later in INDOCHINA, I know what they are capable of'. Donald Reid, 'The Worlds of Frantz Fanon's "L'Algérie se dévoile"', *French Studies*, 61: 4 (2007), 471, notes that in 1944–45 Massu led the Rochambeau ambulance division during the Second World War.
- 8 Fiona Reid, 'The Croix Rouge Française: Femininity and Female Patriotism in Inter-war France', unpublished paper, conference 'Refugees, Outcasts and Migrants, 1930–50', University of Glamorgan, 23 February 2008.
- 9 Conklin, Alice L., 'Redefining "Frenchness": Citizenship, Race Regeneration, and Imperial Motherhood in France and West Africa, 1914–40', in Clancy-Smith and Gouda (eds), *Domesticating the Empire*, 65–82.
- 10 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 85, 240.
- 11 On the concept of the 'incorporated wife' see Hilary Callan, 'The Premise of Dedication: Notes Towards an Ethnography of Diplomat's Wives', in Shirley Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women* (London: Malaby Press, 1975), 87–104; Hilary Callan and Shirley Ardener (eds), *The Incorporated Wife* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

- 12 Philanthropic work with Indian women (hygiene, education, domestic training) was also an expected role of colonels' wives in the British army in India: see Mary A. Procida, *Married to the Empire. Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883–1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 43–7, 165–89. In the British and French armies it was also traditional for colonels' wives to adopt a welfare function in relation to the wives of lower-ranking soldiers or to assume a 'motherly' role towards men in the regiment, for example visiting and comforting the sick or wounded in hospital: see Mona Macmillan, 'Camp Followers: A Note on Wives of the Armed Services', in Callan and Ardener (eds), *Incorporated Wife*, 100–2; Rosemary McKechnie, 'Living with Images of a Fighting Elite: Women and the Foreign Legion', in Sharon Macdonald, Pat Holden and Shirley Ardener (eds), *Images of Women in Peace and War. Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 131–2.
- 13 CAOM 9CAB100, *Oeuvres de bienfaisance*, by Mme Naegelen 1951; 10CAB20, *Thé dames musulmanes* and receptions by Mme Léonard, 1951–54.
- 14 A fuller official title was *Mouvement d'Action Sociale et de Solidarité Féminine* and the local organising committees were named *Comité d'Action Sociale* (CAS).
- 15 SHAT 1H2409, report, *L'Arme psychologique en 10 R.M.*, August 1957; Ryme Seferdjeli, 'The French Army and Muslim Women During the Algerian War (1954–62)', *Hawwa*, 31 (2005), 43–4.
- 16 SHAT 1H1215/3, SAU Cité Mahiéddine; CAOM 2SAS53, SAU Belcourt.
- 17 Dore-Audibert, *Des Françaises d'Algérie*, 74; d'Humière, *L'Armée française*, 149–66; Massu, *Vraie Bataille*, 189–96.
- 18 Reid, 'The Worlds', 472, note 53, remarks, 'some said General Massu made orphans and his wife took care of them'. Reid, 460–1, 472, also comments on the acerbic analysis of Roland Barthes, 'Tricots à domicile', *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, No. 7 (April 1959), reprinted in *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 1, 1942–1965 (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 805–7.
- 19 Massu, *Vraie Bataille*, 196.
- 20 SHAT 1H2461/1, report of Colonel Bravelet, 151e RIM, Guelma Sector to Fifth Bureau, 26 October 1957.
- 21 The UNAF was established by the Ordinance of 3 March 1945 to co-ordinate all associations relating to women and family policy.
- 22 SHAT 1H2569, Chef Bureau Psychologique Constantinois to Cabinet Militaire, Algiers, 23 October 1957.
- 23 Massu, *Le Torrent*, 100–1.
- 24 SHAT 1H2461/1, telex from Fifth Bureau, 20 May 1958; Goussault's secret role in creating the MSF is noted in an unsigned Aide-mémoire, 17 October 1959, CAOM 13CAB61.
- 25 Massu, *Le Torrent*, 103, dismissed this as silly women's business ('*rififi féminin*'), but admitted that the row threatened to cause problems for their husbands as senior commanders.

- 26 CAOM 13CAB37*, letter of Mme Salan to Massu, 17 October 1958.
- 27 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 66–70, 76.
- 28 The memoirs of EMSI, MSF and SAS/SAU personnel reveal the constant search for resources, see for example, Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*.
- 29 See Salan, *Mémoires*. Vol. 3., 293, 296, 312.
- 30 CAOM 14CAB88, General Hubert to Madame Salan, 20 November 1958.
- 31 After General Salan was recalled to France in December 1958 his replacement as *délégué générale*, Paul Delouvrier, as part of the Gaullist strategy to reassert civil political control over the army, severely pruned the MSF budget and subjected it to careful audit: see CAOM 14CAB88, note of Mafart, director of cabinet, 22 May 1959; Delouvrier letter to General Secretary MSF, 4 June 1959.
- 32 See for example SHAT 1H2461/1, report of Captain Schlumberger on Salan's tour through the Orléansville region in September 1958.
- 33 Simone Galice, a dedicated member of the *Centres sociaux* movement, described Mme Massu as 'honest, intelligent and humane', see Dore-Audibert, *Des Françaises d'Algérie*, 74.
- 34 SHAT 1H2483, press cutting; interview with Jacques Perrier, *L'Aurore*, 31 August 1959. See also Massu's personal undated MSF 'manifesto', CAOM 13CAB61.
- 35 CAOM 13CAB61, unauthored *Aide-Mémoire*, 17 October 1958, probably by Jacques de Mari. The legal Statutes established four kinds of annual membership, adherents (100 Fr.), active members (1,000 Fr.), sympathisers (2,000 Fr.) and benefactors (5,000 Fr.).
- 36 CAOM 81F888, a SDECE report, 6 June 1958, noted that the FLN 'has passed orders to flood all the organisations newly created by the French authorities with militants'.
- 37 Massu, *Le Torrent*, 103.
- 38 CAOM 13CAB61, transcript of Mme Massu radio broadcast, in series *Magazine social de la femme*, 11 August 1958. The radical silence regarding the negative aspects of military action can be found in the accounts of most *Algérie française* participants in the EMSI, SAS and MSF, such as Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*: a singular exception is Monique Eoche-Duval, *Madame SAS*, who shared with her SAS husband a difficult and dangerous opposition to senior officers who engaged in torture and mindless brutality. Sambron, *Femmes musulmanes*, 78–84, argues that the EMSI failed to implement the propaganda side of the military agenda and engaged in disinterested welfare activities: but this is to accept at face value the ideological 'humanism' of Thévenin-Copin and others which created a smokescreen for the reality of the EMSI deeply embedded within a repressive military apparatus.
- 39 CAOM 14CAB88, draft of standard letter by Madame Salan.
- 40 CAOM 13CAB37*, letter of Mme Delignette, 23 November 1958.
- 41 See, for example, on the role of colonial service wives in Uganda, Beverley Gartrell, 'Colonial Wives: Villains or Victims?', in Callan and Ardener (eds), *Incorporated Wife*, 176–80.

- 42 CAOM 2SAS53, Bernhardt, *Bulletin de Renseignements* for May 1958.
- 43 SHAT 1H2569, EMSI report, July 1958. Another report from Tablat in November 1958 said that the only way to get Europeans and Muslim wives of local notables to assist was through pressure from the authorities who should make them see they were not, 'the only ones to gain from the benefits of European civilisation'.
- 44 Launay, *Paysans algériens*, 94, who was present in the rich Oran region during 1960–61, notes, 'The wives of the small *colons* cordially detested the wives of the big *colons*, these arrogant people who claimed to undertake charity while ruling over the Comités de Solidarité Féminine created after the "13th of May"'.
- 45 There is a remarkable precedent for the MSF in the *Union des femmes coloniales* which was constituted by the wives of civil servants and colonial agents in the Belgian Congo, whose main remit was to 'civilise' Black native women through infant care, hygiene, and sewing and knitting circles (*ouvrirs*): see Catherine Jacques and Valérie Piette, 'L'Union des femmes coloniales (1923–1940). Une association au service de la colonisation', in Anne Hugon (ed.), *Histoire des femmes en situation coloniale. Afrique et Asie, XXe siècle* (Paris: Karthala, 2004), 95–117. The fact that in the Congo such an intervention by women from metropolitan Europe could occur some thirty years before Algeria seems to be linked to the fact that the former was not a colony of settlement, so that no white society was entrenched (as in Algeria, South Africa, Rhodesia, etc.) with racist and segregationist interests that tended to block social welfare and interventionist programmes for indigenous women.
- 46 For the general background see Duchen, *Women's Rights*, on the conservative implications of natalist policy, Jean-Noel Biraben and J. Dupâquier, *Les Berceaux vides de Marianne: l'avenir de la population française* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).
- 47 Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*.
- 48 On the history of the CNFF and Lefauchaux see the on-line introduction and catalogue to the *Fonds du CNFF (2AF)* held at the *Centre des Archives du Féminisme* (CAF), University of Angers: www.bu.univ-angers.fr/index.
- 49 CAOM 13CAB37*, report of Central Committee of MSF, 20 August 1958.
- 50 On the three candidates see Seferdjeli, 'French "Reforms"', 19–61.
- 51 *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 March 1959, interview with Lefauchaux; CAOM 81F1219: Sid Cara and Lefauchaux presented a joint draft decree to the commission.
- 52 CAOM 14CAB88, R. Martinet to Mafart, 22 May 1959.
- 53 Just a decade earlier Héliopolis had been at the epicentre of the Sétif massacre and settler militias had burned Algerian corpses in the lime kilns of the town.
- 54 SHAT 1H2461/1, report by Mme Tournemine, 8 pages typed, forwarded by Bravelet to General Vanuxem, commander of ZEC, 9 June 1958.

- 55 Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*, 108–9. The Muslim husband on a donkey before his heavily laden wife on foot, or of the husband driving a plough team of mule and wife was a standard colonial caricature in Algeria: see the image titled ‘Bonheur conjugal’ in Mauss-Copeaux, *A Travers le Viseur*. 66–7,
- 56 SHAT 1H2461/1, reports of Captain Schlumberger to Colonel Goussault, 5 and 20 September 1958.
- 57 The key sources are CAOM 14CAB88 and CAOM 81F74 and, unless otherwise specified, provide the basis for the subsequent analysis. Rio-Salado was famous throughout Algeria for the wealth of its European wine producers, and later as a major centre of recruitment for the OAS: interview with Michel Launay, Paris, 25 June 2008.
- 58 On rural–urban migration and the *villages nègres* in Oranie see Xavier Yacono, *La Colonisation des plaines du Chélif* (Algiers: E. Imbert, 1955–56), 2 Vols; and more generally Descloitres et al., *L’Algérie des bidonvilles*; and André Prenant, ‘Facteurs du peuplement d’une ville de l’Algérie intérieure: Sétif’, *Annales de Géographie*, Vol. 72, Nov.–Dec. 1953, 434–51.
- 59 Launay, *Paysans algériens*, has detailed information on Sidi-Saïd, Rio-Salado, and the region by an academic and SAS conscript who carried out field research in 1960–62. Sidi-Saïd was also the location of a prison camp (*Centre de tri et de transit*) for male and female FLN detainees: Michel Launay, interview, Paris, 25 June 2008.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 58–9, 82.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 173–4, 282–3.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 282–5, 303–4: the minimum wage for men was 6.91 Fr. per day; 5 Fr. for women, 4 Fr. for children, whose productivity frequently matched that of men.
- 63 CAOM 81F74, petition from Rio-Salado. Launay, *Paysans algériens*, 283, estimates the number of widows in Sidi-Saïd at 250–300.
- 64 Launay, *Paysans algériens*, 144–51, 362. The local tension between Reformist, pro-FLN supporters, and a more a-political populism reflected a class division between relatively better-off Algerian landowners and self-employed (shopkeepers, traders), and the mass of poor day-labourers.
- 65 The French army and administration disguised the fact that Sidi-Saïd was a resettlement camp, and it shared in the extreme poverty of such forced locations: see Michel Cornaton, *Les Regroupements de la décolonisation en Algérie* (Paris: Éditions ouvrières, 1967), 156–8; Launay, *Paysans algériens*, 184.
- 66 Cornaton, *Les Regroupements*, 160, notes for this region bitter complaints by men that low-paid female labour was being used by *colons* to displace them.
- 67 Launay, *Paysans algériens*, 330, describes this as a form of charity rather than a meaningful economic project.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 279–340, has a detailed analysis of the methods used by both Algerian and European landowners to avoid implementation of welfare legislation

- relating to minimum wages, paid holidays, family benefits, limits on daily hours of work, and other social rights.
- 69 On the racial founding myths of *colons* identity see Peter Dunwoodie, *Writing French Algeria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Pierre Nora, *Les Français d'Algérie* (Paris: Julliard, 1961). A contemporary *pieds-noirs* website for Rio-Salado fully sustains the myth of how courageous settlers transformed 'these wild and deserted places', and established in this, 'ungrateful and infertile soil . . . these fine properties, these magnificent vineyards' and a village with numerous squares and gardens, 'spacious, perfectly tendered, prettily laid out, pleasantly adorned with flowers and perfectly fragrant'. Algerians were air-brushed from this paradise. http://coundris.chez-alice.fr/f_repertoire4.htm (accessed 22 September 2006).
 - 70 Mme Tournemine, from her experience in Héliopolis, advised that women organising circles needed to be courageous and meet 'the hostility of her entourage and most of the Europeans in the area': SHAT 1H2461/1.
 - 71 See Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London*, Part 3, on the austere Victorian idea that indiscriminate charity could only encourage the indolence, vice and 'demoralisation' of the under-class.
 - 72 The brassiere, not worn by rural women, was an evident sign of western propriety: when one ASSRA team distributed bras and explained their use, they later found them made into hats for children, see Mathias, *Les Sections administratives*, 86.
 - 73 *Femmes nouvelles*, 6 (November 1958): this can be consulted at the Paris Bibliothèque nationale, FOL-JO-10185.
 - 74 *Ibid.*, 13 (6 March 1959).
 - 75 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process. Vol. 1. The History of Manners* [first published in German, 1939] (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978 edn).
 - 76 CAOM 81F74.
 - 77 Separate meetings with Algerian men was a standard Fifth Bureau procedure during the MSF campaign; the British in Ghana also recognised the need in a patriarchal society to 'bring men on-side', see Anne Hugon, 'La Redéfinition de la maternité en Gold Coast, des années 1920 aux années 1950: projet colonial et réalités locales', in Hugon (ed.), *Histoire des femmes*, 154–5.
 - 78 See a reproduction in Sambron, *Femmes musulmanes*, 53, of an army poster of an unveiled Muslim woman with the caption, 'Are you not pretty? Unveil yourself': SHAT 1H2504/1.
 - 79 Such oral history information is available for Ghana: Jean Allman, 'Making Mothers: Missionaries, Medical Officers and Women's Work in Colonial Asante', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), 23–48, argues that Asante women were profoundly disinterested in the agenda of 'maternal imperialists', learned nothing new from mother-craft lessons, but were active agents who pragmatically negotiated or shaped the process to gain access to medicines, soap and clothing.
 - 80 CAOM 14CAB88, Gambiez to DGG, 24 May 1959.

- 81 See Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*; Hugon, 'La Redéfinition', 145–71; Allman, 'Making Mothers'.
- 82 Hugon (ed.), *Histoire des femmes*, represents a move in this direction; John Iliffe, *The African Poor. A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 206–8 has information on French post-war social services in colonial Africa, but this was relatively under-funded and fragile compared to the British colonies.