

# Moroccan Film About Prostitution Creates Uproar

By AIDA ALAMI JUNE 3, 2015

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A scene from “Much Loved” by the Moroccan filmmaker Nabil Ayouch. Credit Virginie Surdej

PARIS — A prostitution-themed film from Morocco that had its premiere at the [Cannes Film Festival](#) in May has set off a furor there: After six minutes of excerpts appeared online, the government last week banned the movie from theaters, the female stars received death threats and a male actor was attacked with a knife.

The film, “Much Loved,” by the Moroccan filmmaker Nabil Ayouch, includes scenes of prostitutes in Marrakesh partying, speaking raunchy Arabic and servicing wealthy Saudi clients. Within a few days of the May 19 premiere, the clips had received more than two million views on YouTube. The movie became the subject of protests outside Parliament in Rabat and of heated discussions on social networks in Morocco and France.

Conservative Muslims view “Much Loved” as scandalous. Moderate Moroccans are offended that the film’s dark portrayal of their country was shown at a prestigious international film festival. The communications minister, Mustapha Khalfi, a member of the Justice and Development Party, echoed the outrage expressed by many when he said in a statement, “The film undermines the moral values and dignity of Moroccan women as well as all the image of Morocco.”

Mr. Ayouch, 46, said in a telephone interview that he “was expecting a debate, a polemic, some sort of confrontation because it is a sensitive topic,” then added: “But I am not feeling good about this controversy. I make films because I want Moroccans to see them.”

One of the country’s most prolific filmmakers who is known to shine a light on the seedier aspects of Moroccan life, Mr. Ayouch is

no stranger to run-ins with the government. Officials banned his 2002 film, “A Minute of Sun Less,” because it contained explicit sexual behavior, including between homosexuals.

“The state needs to have faith in the Moroccan people and let them form their own judgment,” Mr. Ayouch said, adding that every Moroccan knows that prostitution, though illegal, is rampant in Marrakesh. “It was important for me to let people hear the voices of these women who live in complete despair.”

“Much Loved” tells the story of four women trying to survive by selling their bodies. After excerpts were leaked online, an actor who played a Saudi client was wounded in a knife attack by a stranger who the actor said accused him of tarnishing Morocco’s image. Death threats were also made against the film’s actresses, including Loubna Abidar. (Mr. Ayouch has secured an apartment where the women can safely stay.)

Recently, appearing on a local radio show, Ms. Abidar jousted with a critical host who warned her that he would go after her morally if she appeared naked in the film. (She does.) But she told the host that she was merely playing a role that Moroccans knew well.

“If I would have played the role of a killer, would that have made me a killer?” Ms. Abidar added. “There are thousands of prostitutes in Morocco. You need to watch the movie to understand that there is much more to it.”



Nabil Ayouch CreditVirginie Surdej

Morocco markets itself as a liberal Muslim country — the same week “Much Loved” was banned, Jennifer Lopez performed a sultry dance at a Rabat music festival that was broadcast on national television.

But King Mohammed VI is also a religious leader who holds the title of commander of the faithful, and the government says Islamic principles should regulate society.

Some analysts say reaction to the film reflects a sensitivity to prostitution rather than the rise of Islamic conservatism in the country.

Abdessamad Dialmy, a researcher in sexual identity at Mohammed V University in Rabat, said: "Prostitution exists but nobody must talk about it. The state lets prostitution exist. This movie shows it, and that is what bothers everyone."

Marrakesh, for example, is a well-known destination for sex tourists from Europe and the Middle East. Prostitution is a pillar of the city's economy. More than 50 percent of prostitutes in the country care for their families by selling sex, according to a Ministry of Health study conducted in 2012 but released last week.

"Sex labor is an informal response to unemployment," Mr. Dialmy said. "In certain regions, it allows the economy to function. It gives work to taxis, hotels and so on. It helps the economy expand."

Meriam Cheikh, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Brussels who is writing her thesis on sex labor in Morocco, said Mr. Ayouch's film accurately portrayed the situation she studied while living for two years among sex workers in Tangiers.

"They are the first victims of unemployment," she said. "Many of them failed their studies, cannot find jobs and engaged in paid sexual relationships while hoping to find a husband and get out of the business."

She agreed that prostitution, though illegal, was tolerated by the authorities.

"Sometimes there are mass arrests, like in 2009, during election times when the state wants to show that it is doing its job," Ms. Cheikh added.

Petitions seeking to lift the ban on "Much Loved" are circulating, and among the film's supporters are the directors Costa-Gavras and the brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne.

"I researched the topic for a year and a half," Mr. Ayouch said, "and the stories of hundreds of broken lives shook me."

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