

Redbird presents

Casablanca Calling

A film by Rosa Rogers



www.casablancacalling.com

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Contents

News Release	3
Full Synopsis	5
Director's Statement	7
Other Production Notes	9
Production Team Biographies	11
Credits	13

Press Release

Casablanca Calling

Morocco's first female Muslim leaders set out to change their country in a quiet social revolution

**1 x 70 minute feature documentary and 1 x 55 minute television documentary
UK 2014 | Dir: Rosa Rogers**

As political conflict and change sweep the Arab World, Casablanca Calling is a new feature documentary which follows the story of a quiet social revolution in Morocco.

In a country where 60% of women have never been to school, a new generation of women are working as official Muslim leaders or Morchidat. The Morchidat work in the poorest communities to separate the true teachings of Islam from prejudice and misunderstanding; support girls' education; campaign against early marriage; and encourage young people to build a better Morocco, rather than dreaming of life in the West. Casablanca Calling is an intimate portrait of three Morchidat, a society in transition, and a mission to educate a nation.

The introduction of the Morchidat programme to train women as religious preachers and guides was launched in 2006. The Islam the Morchidat teach is based on tolerance, compassion and equality. Their work is part of a raft of reforms introduced to strengthen the position of women in Moroccan society. It is also part of a response to the rise in extremism, manifest in the terrorist attacks that struck Casablanca in 2003.

Casablanca Calling follows three Morchidat working in mosques, schools, prisons and orphanages around the country. **Karima** is witty, mischievous and outgoing. She works in the capital, Rabat, adores shopping, watching Oprah Winfrey, and – most of all - working with young people. **Bouchra** is a powerhouse of energy working in Larache in the North where she's determined to change the culture of misogyny and champion girls' education. **Hannane** is warm, wise and compassionate. She works hard to separate the true teachings of Islam from superstition, misinterpretation and unquestioning traditions.

Director Rosa Rogers and Producer Hilary Durman learned about the Morchidat in Morocco from reading an English language newspaper while working in China. For Rosa, the idea of following their work had an immediate appeal.

"I wanted to explore the work of Morchidat by telling human stories which transcend cultural barriers and illuminate everyday truths about the lives of women in the Arab world - lives which are often closed and off-limits to those outside. As I learned about the work of the Morchidat and the lives of the women they work with, I discovered a different Islam from images which dominate Western mainstream media. On every step of the way with this film so far, I have had my ideas and preconceptions consistently challenged, reframed and expanded."

Rosa Rogers has made many international and award-winning documentaries, but Casablanca Calling is her first documentary feature film. The Producer for Redbird is Hilary Durman whose previous documentary features include The Time of Their Lives for BBC Storyville/UKFC, and the award-winning Donor Unknown, broadcast internationally and released in cinemas in the UK. The third key member of the team over 3 years of filming is Associate Producer Merieme Addou in Morocco.

Casablanca Calling has development funding and support from Documentary Campus; the Sundance Documentary Fund; WorldView; the Hartley Film Foundation; EU Media; the French American Charitable Trust. It is a Redbird production, with co-producers ITVS in the USA, and Cocottes Minute in France.

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The Story of The Film – Full Synopsis

Casablanca Calling opens with the panoramic Rabat skyline dominated by endless satellite dishes set against the sky, as a melancholy and resonant soundscape of voices from television, radio and public discourse illustrate the kind of attitudes which frame many women's lives in Morocco.

Against this background, we follow three exceptional women who are part of a new generation of female Muslim leaders, called the Morchidat.

Hannane is a poetic soul - warm, wise and compassionate. She became a Morchidat to challenge the superstitions, misrepresentations and restrictive social traditions which people confuse with Islamic teaching. Working in mosques and schools in the capital, Rabat, Hannane has a loyal following of women and teenagers who make never-ending demands on her time.

Bouchra is a powerhouse of energy – as a student Morchidat she came top of her year. Posted to Larache in the north of Morocco, she now works in villages where local customs and beliefs are hard to change. In the evenings she mentors girls in a boarding school for the rural poor. Many are the first girls in their family to get an education and some struggle with fathers and brothers who want them to leave school and stay at home. Bouchra is determined to change the culture of misogyny in the region.

Karima has been a Morchidat for just two years, working in Rabat. She is bright and outgoing with a mischievous sense of humour. She adores shopping, telling stories, watching Oprah Winfrey, and spending precious time with her husband and children. She loves working with young people, encouraging their ambitions and aspirations. Last year she won a national prize and travelled to Europe to talk about the role of women in Islam.

Casablanca Calling follows Karima, Bouchra and Hannane and the people they support in their day to day work as Morchidat. There are many problems they are asked to resolve: a girl bullied by her father and brother; a young woman pressed to give up her education and marry against her will; a young man desperate to emigrate to Europe; a young woman working from dawn to dusk at home and in the fields, while the men stand idly by. These personal stories of conflict and change are linked through our central characters to paint a vivid portrait of a society in a state of gentle transformation.

In a rundown school in Rabat, Hannane talks Fatima Zahra, 15 and promised in marriage to a man she hardly knows. There is pressure on her to leave school. Hannane reassures her with ways she can stand up to her father using Sharia law to support her rights. Promising to return soon, Hannane reflects on a community where men believe their wives and children are their property; where few girls go to school beyond puberty; where some young people have idealised images of life in the West; and where others think that suicide bombers are heroes.

The next day Hannane is in the mosque, trying to persuade a woman called Fatna that marrying her granddaughter at 14 is not only wrong but illegal. In the new family law, girls must be 18 to marry, and her granddaughter should be at school. Fatna seems to listen.

In the shadow of the Rif mountains, Bouchra walks up a dusty path through strawberry fields full of women tending the crops before harvest. She's on her way to meet two women who work on the land – Rachida and her friend who has made a disastrous marriage for her young daughter. She encourages them to think about the importance of knowing a man before marriage. She notes Rachida is strong and independent – 'not like the other girls in the village'.

As night falls, Bouchra listens to 14 year old Merieme in a boarding school for girls from villages in the mountains. Merieme explains that her father allows her no freedom. Bouchra tries to help her understand that his controlling behaviour is born out of fear – this is a region where an unmarried girl getting pregnant can destroy an entire family, a village. Bouchra's mission is to help these girls complete their education, breaking the cycle of early marriage and a life of servitude that is the experience of so many.

When she next returns to the school, it is to terrible news. A student has killed herself after being beaten in front of all her schoolfriends and locked up at home by her father. Bouchra gathers the girls together to comfort them, and lead them in prayer. She will call in all the parents to discuss what has happened and to try to influence the way that fathers control their teenage daughters.

In Rabat, we meet Karima enjoying a rare moment of free time with her husband and children. In a school in a poor area of town, she talks to teenagers about their idealised images of the West. Karima believes that until young Moroccans feel proud of their Muslim identity and culture, mass emigration and violent extremism will not diminish. At present both are tearing apart the soul of Morocco. She wants to see change within a generation, and educating women and young people must be the way forward.

Casablanca Calling takes us into a world we rarely see in the West. This is an intimate portrait of lives in transition: not only the lives of the Morchidat who are taking on a role women have not been able to fulfil before; but also the lives of those who are touched by them. Though Karima, Hannane and Bouchra are all very different personalities, the Islam they teach is based on love, generosity and open-mindedness and we witness their tireless work to bring a peaceful change for the better to the country they love.

A Personal Statement from Director, Rosa Rogers

We first heard about the Morchidat whilst filming in China – in an obscure corner of an English language newspaper. The article announced the start of a new programme in Morocco to train women as religious leaders. They were to work alongside male Imams in mosques but also to have a wider role in society, working in schools, orphanages, prisons, hospitals and other public institutions. Only a year before, Casablanca had been devastated by an unforeseen terrorist attack which claimed many lives. The article said this new generation of religious leaders were setting out to bring the true teachings of Islam to the wider population, and especially to women. We were intrigued. At the time there was a lot of debate about the leadership roles women could take in Christianity and at the same time, in the wake of 9/11 and the London bombings, anti-Islam sentiments were high in much of the popular media. We read that the Morchidat were part of wider reforms in Morocco aimed at giving women more rights and we wanted to find out more.

We approached the Moroccan embassy in the UK to say we were interested in making a documentary about the Morchidat and showed them examples of films we'd made before. Almost a year later, we were told the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in Morocco welcomed our proposal and we were invited to meet them in Rabat.

In a long meeting, we tried to explain the kind of film we wanted to make and found there were a lot of suspicions. There had been international news coverage about the Morchidat and the Ministry felt much of it had been misrepresentation. They wanted to know our intentions, what we understood about Islam, what we wanted to say about Islam. They agreed to us going ahead in principle. But we soon discovered that the concept of observational documentary was a new one, and that each trip would become a new struggle to regain permissions.

On a visit to a mosque where a Morchidat was working, we were overwhelmed by the sheer number of women and their enthusiasm for the work of the Morchidat. They all told us that before this they had nobody to talk to about how to resolve problems in their lives, no one to explain their religion to them, no support in everyday spiritual life. They convinced us this was a story worth telling.

We met Bouchra and Karima in the final stages of their training and they spoke about the problems facing Morocco and the need for change. They wanted to see girls getting an education, an end to early marriage, and young people developing their full potential and choosing to build a better Morocco rather migrate to the West. We'd found two of our characters and we met Hannane soon after.

Filming Casablanca Calling was the most challenging experience of my filming career. The endlessly changing permits needed for every place we filmed in and the cultural suspicion of cameras meant that for every day we were able to film, there were five or six days which came to an abrupt halt. We'd hoped to get all filming done within 10 months - it ended up being closer to 3 years.

Despite the difficulties, I believe passionately that the work of the Morchidat is groundbreaking and that their story must be told. I feel strongly about the misrepresentation of Islam in much of Western mainstream media and want to show a different side. We wanted to tell human stories which transcend cultural divides, and simultaneously illuminate everyday truths about the lives of ordinary women in the Arab world – lives which are often closed and off-limits to those outside. As newly elected Islamic governments come to power across the Arab world – the role of the Morchidat in Morocco seems even more important. How – within an Islamic framework – can women achieve their full potential? And how can ideas and attitudes that have been entrenched for generations be overturned?

Other Production Notes

The Political Background

In May 2003, Morocco was shaken by a set of violent suicide bombings by radical Islamic fundamentalists, which killed 45 people in Casablanca. Since then, the Moroccan government has taken steps to reform the religious landscape in the country.

In 2005 as part of this effort, King Mohammed VI introduced an innovative - and controversial - programme to train women as religious leaders or Morchidat. 50 Morchidat are selected for the rigorous training each year and on graduation, each Morchidat is assigned to a mosque. In their teaching, these women preach a balanced and tolerant version of Islam, and they provide important support and guidance to their communities.

The mosques have always played a big role in the spiritual, social and educational life of Morocco, but until now they have been dominated by men. The mosque was always the territory of the Imam, but in a break from the past, the Morchidat not only work in the mosque but go out to meet people in the streets, in homes, prisons, schools, orphanages and hospitals. They offer spiritual, moral, social and personal guidance and support. Their big challenge is to help people to understand the true teachings of Islam and separate these from the restrictive traditions which have often become confused with religious truth. But they are working in a society where over 60% per cent of women are illiterate - and over 80% in rural areas - compared with around 40% of men.

Working on Casablanca Calling, a personal perspective from Associate Producer, Merieme Addou

Casablanca Calling is my first experience of working on a feature documentary. After studying for a law degree. I started out as a Journalist/correspondent for many foreign radio and television companies. When I met Rosa, I had already worked on several news reports about the Morchidat for the BBC, Fox, and Radio Canada, but a longer documentary was something different. .

The Morchidat are a rare experiment in the Muslim world, where the interpretation of Islam has been largely a male province. Before the Morchidat, Moroccan women had no one to answer their questions about spiritual, moral, social and personal issues. As well as challenging this male domination of interpretation, the Morchidat have also challenged the male dominance of the mosque. But their mission is a difficult one as they work to overcome so many problems facing Moroccan society. So many cultural traditions – from early marriage to women’s education - have become confused with religious teaching and it is challenge to separate them in people’s minds.

I think that every single step of making Casablanca Calling was a big challenge. It was a massive challenge to get permission to film, especially inside the mosque, and also to find women to take part. The Morchidat have been able to reach groups that a male Imam never could, and in a conservative society like Morocco, it is a very intimate thing to talk about personal problems, and it's even more challenging to do it on camera. So every time we filmed someone, we had to start from the beginning and explain in great detail what we wanted to do, and how our film would challenge stereotypes about the role of women in Islam.

Casablanca Calling follows the Morchidat as they actively affirm the rights and responsibilities that they believe the Koran affords to women. I don't think you often hear about that aspect of Islam in headline news.

About the Production Team - Biographies

Director: Rosa Rogers

Rosa began her film making career making short experimental dance and poetry films for Channel 4 which won prizes at festivals around the world. She was drawn to the world of documentaries and over the past few years has directed many short documentaries for leading UK broadcasters which have been shown across several continents. Prize winning films include: *The Greatest Show on Earth*, the story of a deaf dancer who performs in the Rio Carnival; *Dragon People*, a young photographer's journey through modern China; and *Back to Bombay* in which a British Indian woman travels to India to meet her family for the first time. She has twice been a finalist in the One World Media Awards. *Casablanca Calling* is her first feature documentary, following the work of Morocco's new generation of female Muslim leaders. Rosa is currently editing her second feature documentary, *Pirates of Salé*, which tells the story of the transformation of a group of disadvantaged young people in Morocco into world-class contemporary circus artists.

Producer: Hilary Durman

Hilary Durman is a director of award-winning indie Redbird. She has won three BAFTAs for dramas including *Oddsquad* by John Godber and *Dream On* by Ray Harrison Graham.

Hilary has produced documentaries for BBC and Channel 4 on many different subjects – *Without You* focused on young people coping with bereavement, *Picture of Hull* explored the work of playwright John Godber and *The Greatest Show on Earth* followed a deaf woman's journey to dance in Rio Carnival. She was Executive Producer of *New Shoots* and *The Shooting Party*, Channel 4's debut documentary series for disabled directors.

In 2009, she produced *The Time of Their Lives* for BBC Storyville and the UK Film Council. Her second feature documentary was *Donor Unknown*, a Redbird and Met Film co-production, directed by Jerry Rothwell. Alongside *Casablanca Calling*, she is currently producing *Pirates of Salé*, a documentary about Morocco's first professional circus school, and *Special*, a drama documentary made with and about young people with learning disabilities.

Associate Producer: Merieme Addou

Born in Morocco, Merieme Addou graduated from Mohammed V University with a degree in Law. She lives and works in Rabat as freelance correspondent for Radio D-W. She is also a Producer for Camino Media, a Moroccan production company based in Rabat. From 2005 - 2008, Merieme worked as assistant to the BBC correspondent in Morocco. Her role included research, setting up interviews, finding and advising on stories, interpreting and translating. She has worked as a correspondent for Kuwait TV and as an AP for Al Jazeera International. She has also acted as a

freelance Producer for ADTV, Qatar TV, BBC 2, Radio 4, Time Magazine, the Financial Times, BBC World, SABC, National Geographic Magazine, Fox News, CNN, and Bloomberg. She has produced a documentary for Moroccan national television about Orson Welles and his relationship with the city of Essouaira, and a series of programmes about Moroccan women in history. She is currently studying for a post-graduate degree in Documentary Film.

Casablanca Calling Credits

Filmed and directed by

Rosa Rogers

Producer

Hilary Durman

Associate Producer/Sound

Merieme Addou

Editors

Fred Hart

Andrew Hassenruck

Composer

Andy Cowton

Guembri played by

Simo Lagnawi

Online Editors

Matt Troughton

Samuel Génot

Sound Design and Mix

Vince Watts

Didier Ray

Rodolphe Paulet

Graphics

Ben Hole

Production Co-ordinator

Jeannie Blumire

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Documentary Campus

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