

# SOFIA



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## SYNOPSIS

Sofia, 20, lives with her parents in Casablanca. Suffering from pregnancy denial, she finds herself breaking the law by giving birth to a baby out of wedlock. The hospital gives her 24 hours to provide them with the identification papers belonging to the father of the child before informing the authorities...

## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Meryem Benm'Barek was born in 1984 in Rabat. She studied Arabic Languages and Civilisations at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations in Paris before entering the directing department at INSAS in Brussels in 2010. There, she directed five short films, notably **NOR** (2013) and **JENNAH** (2014), which was selected for numerous international film festivals, and was considered for submission for an Academy Award in 2015. She also creates sound design art and has had exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. **SOFIA**, her first feature film, is notably a recipient of the Gan Fondation prize and a grant from the Doha Film institute.



# DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

**MERYEM BENM'BAREK, screenwriter and director**

## **SOFIA tells the story of a young Moroccan woman who is in pregnancy denial and gives birth to a baby out of wedlock. How did this project come about ?**

When I was a teenager, my mother told me an upsetting story about a young girl who was taken in by my grandparents. She was 17 and my mother, who was barely older than her at the time, discovered entirely by chance one evening that the girl was pregnant and about to give birth. A wedding had to then be organized as quickly as possible.

These stories are quite common in Morocco, where it is forbidden for unmarried people to have sex. Everybody there has heard of or knows about someone who has suffered from pregnancy denial, or of a child born from parents who aren't married. It's a situation bound to be complicated because both the mother and the father are likely to be prosecuted and sentenced to jail. As a result, marriage is the only possible solution.

The story naturally came about from asking myself how a tragedy like this one shines a light on society's problems, revealing the various cracks and gaps in the workings of a society.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that, in Morocco, marriage is still a sign of success that everyone ultimately aims for. It allows you to establish your social position : and so weddings must be as lavish, flashy and sumptuous as possible. We are in a society of appearances where the image one offers of themselves and their family is very important. SOFIA's parents are far

more preoccupied with the modest social class the father of the child belongs to than with the child itself. In the end their daughter's pregnancy is less disgraceful than her inevitable marriage to this boy who comes from a poor neighborhood. It naturally has to do with saving the family's honor and their daughter's honor as well, but also and above all to preserve their image in the eyes of others, all the more so since the incident occurs at a crucial moment for this family, as they are about to sign a contract with their French bother-in-law that will change their lives and help them move up the social ladder.

## **SOFIA is thus a film about social divisions in Moroccan society ?**

It is the portrayal of a country today. I didn't want to make a film that only speaks about the condition of women in Morocco, who are always depicted as victims of a social patriarchy, for I don't believe we can speak about the condition of women in society without talking about society itself. The place of women in society is defined in relation to its socio-economic framework : this is what SOFIA is depicting.

I was born in Morocco and I grew up in Belgium, where I studied filmmaking, but once I finished my studies, I chose to return to the country where I was born and I experienced from my adult's perspective how Moroccan society functioned, and what it truly had to offer its youth. Social divisions are so deep that they prevent any form of progress. Young people from modest backgrounds are shackled by their social position. They have no hope for the future, no perspective for evolving regardless of their motivation, their energy or their personal engagement. There is a glass ceiling that forces them to



stay in their social position, the very same they were born with. In fact, people's futures are entirely dependent upon their origins. Nor is the educational system designed to reverse the situation and bring this social partitioning to an end. The best schools are private and consequently very expensive while public schools have been severely neglected. As a result, young people from rich and poor backgrounds never meet; everyone grows up on their side of the social divide.

## **SOFIA and her cousin Lena perfectly epitomize these two faces of Moroccan society, at once traditional and turned towards the Western world.**

The characters' fears are a good indication of how Moroccan society functions. In fact, this is how I thought out the story. SOFIA and Lena grew up in different circles. SOFIA comes from a middle-class family firmly anchored in tradition. She wears a jellaba for most of the film; her French is shaky, which is a true indication of social class in Morocco – she was only able to get a job in a call center that ended up dismissing her. Lena, on the other hand, comes from a very wealthy background. Her French is better than her Arabic, she is very feminine, has a social life, a university education, a Moroccan mother and a French father. These factors make her a freer and more liberated person than SOFIA.

Lena's character looks upon the Arab world from a westerner's point of view in general and in particular when it comes to Moroccan society. Her view is sometimes tainted by self-righteousness. Lena could very well have gone to a foreign country, but she chose to be an intern in Morocco because in her mind, she could be useful to her country. She's kind and means well, but also naïve. What happens to SOFIA propels her into a reality that is not her own, and her illusions are going to be shattered. Lena and SOFIA don't have the same viewpoint upon the situation. In the end, SOFIA's awareness of what reality is like is much sharper than Lena's when it comes to the social and economic risks that this pregnancy and wedding entail. Lena sees SOFIA as a victim, whereas SOFIA refuses to be one.



**SOFIA's French uncle, Lena's father, is like a tutelary presence casting its shadow over the family. Everyone speaks about Jean-Luc but he's never seen.**

It was a conscious choice I made early on, at the screenwriting stage, to never have him appear on screen. For the entire film, he is off screen, and yet his presence and influence are actually stronger because of this. Jean-Luc is an all-powerful force for SOFIA's family because he is the key to the entire family's social advancement. This character – and the importance the others bestow upon him – reveals a great deal about Moroccan society and the privileged place that is still granted to the French man, seen as the one who has the money, and thus the power. However, this conception prevails mostly within the middle and upper-middle classes. The working-class is much less inclined to accept French omnipotence, and particularly when it comes to the younger generation who are aware of France and Morocco's colonial past.

## **Omar is the other main male character in the movie and perhaps the other casualty in the story.**

Exactly. Omar is a victim. His opinion never really counts. He's still mourning his father. In fact, he's supposed to be the man in the family, but he is unable to face his new responsibilities. He's emotionally fragile. When SOFIA comes into their lives, Omar's mother very quickly understands what is at stake and particularly how to take advantage of the situation. She sees marriage as a way out for Omar, a way to alleviate his distress, a way to force him to shoulder his role within their family which will allow him to meet the family's needs thanks to the job that Jean-Luc is bound to give him.

From this perspective, the film also questions the condition of men. Men are required to shoulder the responsibility of their family and are subjected



to relentless social pressure. For a boy like Omar, coming from a modest background, he doesn't have the privilege of ignoring his family's needs. I imagined a poetic individual. He hasn't yet had the time to fully grow up when he's faced very early on in life with his responsibilities. He steps into his father's shoes and carries the burden of his family on his own. SOFIA is the depiction of a country in which I definitely wanted the condition of both the women and the men to be included.

## **SOFIA is your first feature film and its naturalism is striking. What were your esthetic references ?**

I wanted the staging to be very straightforward. I didn't necessarily want to be "fashionable." In cinema, I like Asghar Farhadi, Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Cristian Mungiu. These independent filmmakers inspire me as much in form as in content. Asghar Farhadi has a gift for depicting Iranian society through his characters' fears and anxieties. He often plays with off-screen work, his staging is never ostentatious. Cristian Mungiu also uses off-screen a great deal in 4 MONTHS, 3 WEEKS, 2 DAYS. He has a real feel for framing, especially when opting for the hand-held camera.

SOFIA starts off as a social thriller before becoming a sociological study. The point is less to know who the father of the child is than to show the pressure imposed by a society that cannot conceive of a child being born out of wedlock. As a result, the family drama takes precedence, and the power play between the characters emerges.

## **Your shots are framed like windows opening onto Moroccan society.**

Yes, the shots were framed with this idea of portraiture. Many of the scenes were composed using frames within the camera frame. I then zoomed in to leave the frames and zero in on the characters. For instance the family meal at the beginning of the movie opens as a tableau within the living room door-frame above which a Koran verse dedicated to the family is engraved. SOFIA is off screen until her father asks her to bring dessert to the table. This first image of the film is like a snapshot of a Moroccan family.

## **Why did you choose Casablanca as the location for SOFIA ?**

Firstly, because it's the city I know best in Morocco. And especially because as the country's economic capital, the social divisions are all the more visible there. Everybody comes to Casablanca looking for work, trying to climb up the social ladder. The different neighborhoods that make up the city are a perfect replica of Moroccan society as a whole. I filmed the neighborhoods which in my eyes were best suited to my subject matter : Derb Sultan, where Omar's family lives, is one of the oldest neighborhoods and mostly working-class. Downtown, where SOFIA's family lives, is dominated by colonial architecture recounting the country's history; Anfa, where Lena and her parents live, is the place which has the greatest concentration of villas and lavish estates.

## **How did you choose the young actress who plays SOFIA ?**

I was looking for a stern-faced Moroccan beauty, a young woman who expresses a sense of tradition, someone whose intense determination can be seen in her eyes. Maha Alemi was a natural for the role. I knew her before making the movie and I wrote SOFIA with her in mind. She wasn't an actress at the beginning, but she had the confidence and part of mystery necessary for the character : SOFIA is a tragic, ceaselessly hindered figure who tries by herself to exist, through denying the father of her child any escape route.

## **Did you also write Lena's character with an actress in mind ?**

No. In fact it was a bit more complicated to find the right person. I met 250 actresses; many were much too affected. I was looking for a bubbly person, a natural beauty. She had to speak French as well as she spoke Arabic. The way she held herself also had to embody this idea of the Moroccan upper class. I found Sarah Perles just three weeks before shooting started.

## **And Omar ?**

I truly fell in love right away with Hamza Khafif. We met by chance through mutual acquaintances. He was working in a theater troupe, but before anything else he is a slammer. His body type perfectly corresponded to what I

had imagined for Omar. I also liked that there was an aura of melancholy about him, this bit of sadness in his eyes. I had to convince him ahead of time just to do the screen tests. I saw other actors, but in my eyes he was Omar. I actually rewrote the role for him. He literally was the inspiration for fleshing out the character of Omar. Omar's gentleness comes directly from Hamza Khafif.

## **How do you think SOFIA will fare in Morocco ?**

I made sure that nothing in the film could be taken as grounds for censorship. It was important to me that as many people as possible would be able to see the movie so that a real debate could take place concerning the issues raised by the film. I hope that the public will find things in this story that they identify with, for I meant the story to be as accessible as possible. I was also extremely careful about avoiding stereotypes.

I'm not passing any judgment. I'm merely depicting today's reality : Every day in Morocco, 150 women give birth out of wedlock; they risk going to jail, and are stigmatized, along with their children.

**Interview by Anthony BOBEAU**

## CAST

**Maha ALEMI** SOFIA  
**Lubna AZABAL** LEILA  
**Sarah PERLES** LENA  
**Faouzi BENSÄÏDI** FAOUZI  
**Hamza KHAFIF** OMAR  
**Nadia NIAZI** ZINEB  
**Rawia** ZOHRA

## TECHNICAL DETAILS

Sound Format **5.1**  
Ratio **Scope**  
Running Time **80'**  
Original Version **French, Arabic**  
Year of Production **2018**  
Countries of Production **France, Qatar**

## CREW

DIRECTOR **Meryem BENM'BAREK**  
SCREENPLAY **Meryem BENM'BAREK**  
1st ASSISTANT **Pascale GUERRE**  
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY **Son DOAN**  
SOUND & SOUND EDITING **Aïda MERGHOUB**  
SET DESIGNER **Samuel CHARBONNOT**  
EDITOR **Céline PERREARD**  
DIRECTOR OF POSTPRODUCTION  
**Susana ANTUNES**  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS  
**Christine DE JEKEL and Saïd HAMICH**  
ARTISTIC PRODUCER  
**Lisa VERHAVERBEKE (CURIOSA FILMS)**  
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER  
**Emilien BIGNON (CURIOSA FILMS)**  
PRODUCER  
**Olivier DELBOSC (CURIOSA FILMS)**  
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