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Original Research Paper

Examining the Social Situation of Rural Women in Taounate Province, Northern Morocco



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Abstract

Gender inequality remains a pervasive problem, with cultural, traditional and ideological factors as well as religious interpretations, contributing to differences and inequalities between men and women. These differences can lead to gender disparities in the division of labor and the undervaluation of women's contributions in various aspects of life. This study aims to explore the social situation of rural women in Morocco, with a particular focus on the Taounate Province in the country's northern region. The paper investigates whether rural women and girls have been adequately considered in governmental actions and development initiatives, and if so, whether these initiatives effectively benefit them. Additionally, the study assesses how these actions may contribute to or hinder the success of development in rural areas. Ultimately, this research sheds light on the challenges and opportunities are faced by rural women in Taounate Province and provide insights into potential solutions to address the gender disparities that continue to exist in these communities.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The study focuses on exploring the living conditions of rural women and girls residing in Taounate province, Northern Morocco. These categories of the population were compelled to live in underprivileged areas due to geographical factors, where developmental actions have failed to reach. This topic was selected as it is still prevalent to observe school-aged girls being exploited for agricultural and domestic labor, while some have even become mothers during their early childhood.

When I began this topic, there was a debate started on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs hereafter) (WHO, 2008) which Morocco endorsed the commitment to accomplish. Thus, although only two goals specifically mention women (the 3rd to promote gender equality and empower women; and the 5th to improve maternal health), none— with the possible exception of the 8th one: (to develop a global partnership for development) – can be achieved without giving close attention to women and to gender issues. As a result, the

nation witnessed the introduction of the National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD) as a means of fostering the advancement of marginalized and isolated regions of the country, particularly those where women were most vulnerable (Idrissi, 2022).

The primary objective of this paper is to address the inquiry of how to enhance the abilities of women and girls residing in rural areas, with the aim of transforming their current circumstances. To do so, we need to analyze the main factors shackling the success of human development projects targeting this category of the population in the province. Consequently, besides adding to the knowledge pool, I found myself grappling with several challenging questions due to the complexity of the subject matter. These can be summarized in providing answers to the following problems: first, despite several literacy efforts, illiteracy still dominates among women in these rural communities (Table 1). Second, rural women and girls are still concealed from most statistical reports and are still considered inactive or at best cases 'family helpers' (Table 2).

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To answer these queries, I divided my paper into five sections. I started with an introduction, where I defined the topic, my motivations for the choice, the questions I dealt with, my objectives behind this study and finally how I arranged the paper. The first section provides a review of the literature dealing with gender and human development and defines the set of concepts used in the paper. The second discusses the topic of migration (internal and inter-rural, in particular) from many perspectives, and examines the ways in which migration in its relationship with development might be shaped by gender. The third explains and justifies how I approached my paper and outlines the methodology and methods embarked on in my study. The fourth one depicts the societal circumstances in which rural women find themselves. The fifth one articulates the findings the research paper came out with. In this section, I have provided a diagnosis of current state of affairs concerning rural girls and women in the areas under study. Towards the end of the paper, I provided a summary of sections, deductions, main claims, and concluding remarks. Finally, I ended up by an epilogue as an overall assessment and a set of recommendations addressed to decision makers and future researchers.

2 METHODOLOGY

The diversity of sources let me divide my data into two main categories: secondary and primary, entering under two families of research: deskwork and fieldwork. These were collected on three main stages.

2.1 Methods

To enhance the comprehensiveness and insightfulness of my research, I adopted a 'triangular' approach, which involved integrating various complementary research

techniques. Firstly, to generate case studies, I broadened my data collection methods by gathering primary and secondary data through questionnaires, interviews, observations, and document analysis. This allowed me to systematically examine my own involvement and gain a more intuitive grasp of the issues in the region. Secondly, I contemplated merging the case study and survey methodologies. Finally, I incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods, with a greater emphasis on the former.

2.2 Data

Given the nature of the topic and because of certain personal constraints, my first years of research had been desk- and field-based work, while the two years that followed had been purely desk-based work, in the literal sense, as I worked either in the library or at my desk at home, continually. However, my fieldwork during this period continued via telephone and internet correspondence.

Since most research investigations are built on top of previous research, it is legitimate and important to use the existing literature. Many studies have paid attention to the crucial contribution of rural women to the well-being and survival of their families, particularly in Morocco. Consequently, numerous scholars, including Abdelkrim-Chikh (1982), Agnaou (2004a, 2004b), Baker (1998), Belarbi (1987, 1991), Belghiti (1978), Belloncle (1980), Benrahmoune (1997), Chiapuris (1979), Crapanzano (1980), Davis (1983), Ennaji and Sadiqi (2008), Idrissi (2022), Karoui (1989), Mernissi (1988), Sadiqi (2003), Senhaji (1995), Steinmann (1998), Zahid and Hamdane (2004), and Zaoude (1993) among others, have demonstrated an increasing awareness.

Table 1. The projects initiated under the NIHD programs

Years	Commune	Project title	Number of beneficiaries	Total cost (MAD)	INDH share (MAD)	Project Leader	Sector
2010	Bouadel	Purchase of the mini bus for school transport	50	360000	200000	Rural Community of Bouadel	Education
2011	Bouadel	Purchase of the mini bus for school transport	90	360000	200000	Rural Community of Bouadel	Education
2013	Bouadel	Purchase of the mini bus for school transport	40	360000	50000	Rural Community of Bouadel	Education
2016	Bouadel	Purchase of the mini bus for school transport	200	480000	300000	Rural Community of Bouadel	Education
2018	Bouadel	Construction of Dar Taliba in Bouadel	90	3500000	1000000	Provencial Council	Education
		Total		5060000	1750000		

Source: Social Action Division at the Province of Taounate.

Table 2. The demographic and socio-economic traits of the populace residing in the communities

Administrative Subdivisions	Gender	Population	Illiteracy Rate	Population by Activity		
				Active Population	Non-Active Population	Activity rate
Ain Mediouna Rural community	Males	7 769	29,7	3 827	3 942	49,3
	Females	8 641	62,8	1 227	7 414	14,2
	Total	16 410	47,5	5 054	11 356	30,8
Bouadel rural community	Males	6 711	23,5	3 408	3 303	50,8
	Females	6 980	60,3	1 107	5 873	15,9
	Total	13 691	42,3	4 515	9 176	33,0

Source: High Commission for Planning, Census (2004).

Background reading and the literature review is a process which most researchers cannot do without. Thus, several prior studies have been woven into this work. These secondary data helped me have a context for conducting my study. These are publications (books, articles, ...), government statistics and reports, meetings and conferences' reports and notes and media materials (TV programs, online newspapers, ...).

I conducted a survey on women and girls from three villages (Ain Mediouna, Aouled Azam and Beni Qurra). This was in the form of questionnaires, interviews and observation:

2.2.1 Questionnaires

Because the population in the study areas I have chosen is too large, it was challenging to cover all the inhabitants. Subsequently, a survey was carried out using non-random sampling methods, which included 'purposive' and 'snowballing' sampling techniques. These methods were deemed suitable for capturing the views of the remaining population residing in the three villages. These two types of sampling had turned out to a quota sampling that may be summarized as follows: first, a purposive sampling— where informants were chosen based on the purpose of the study restricting the sample population to a very specific population which is to study attitudes of illiterate women and 'semi-literate' girls. Second, snowball sampling, building up a sample through informants for the rest of the interviews and some questionnaires. Third, quota sampling as the study was based upon a simple comparison of six groups, as I have chosen 30 women from each of the three villages. Therefore, two structured questionnaires —with a slight difference— were administered, in an equal way, to a sample of: literacy attendants and non-formal education attendants.

2.2.2 Interviews

In order to gather more information about women's situations and attitudes on some questions, I conducted a number of interview meetings which had been structured and non-structured because some informants were interviewed using some of the surveys' provided questions. As a result, my surveys inadvertently evolved

into interviews. Additionally, some interviews took the form of individual informal free conversations about their life stories.

2.2.3 Observation

This research tool helped me eyewitness, even photograph, when possible, women and girls' use of space, work among other practices. I was both a 'complete participant observer' and 'participant-as-observer', both 'covertly' and 'overtly'. I was 'covert complete participant observer' in my hometown (data recalled and recollected from childhood memory, and when visiting family members when grown up); and 'overt participant-as-observer' in the other two villages as only a guest.

2.3 Procedures Followed

While collecting data, I worked on three stages. The first stage consisted of visiting several libraries to sort out the literature relating to my topic, taking notes of the different forms of the data collected and classifying them using a preliminary outline. The second stage involved travelling to the areas under study to collect primary data: (distribute and complete questionnaires; conduct interviews and carry out some observations), as well as interpreting questionnaires and interviews. In the third phase, and with the purpose of collecting secondary data (statistics, reports, maps, technical papers, etc...), this stage consisted of conducting as many visits as possible to several government establishments: the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ministry of National Education, the Delegation of the Ministry of National Education in the province, the High Commission for Planning (HCP) and the Department of the Social Work in the Province, to cite but a few.

The data collected from the questionnaires was ordered, analyzed and tallied quantitatively in statistical and tabular format, where appropriate. Certain responses were approached in a qualitative way. Also, some qualitative questions were analyzed quantitatively. The interviews and observations provided more detailed qualitative data.

2.4 Difficulties of Research

Throughout this research paper, various factors have acted as impediments in one way or another. Some of these could be summarized in what follows: being an indigenous of one of these villages, I was concerned that my presence could affect the responses of the informants, so I had to find someone to take my place in that village. Moreover, most informants had been unable to complete the questionnaires themselves, which made the fact an onerous task. However, I have not lost questionnaires. In fact, I eliminated, deliberately, unreliable and non-complete copies because some of the respondents refused to answer certain questions. Hence, I added other copies to replace the number lacking in some groups to keep hold of the comparative study type. More importantly, I chose not to record the interviews because I believed it could harm the establishment of a sense of immediacy and trust between me and the interviewee. Additionally, I wanted to respect the privacy of the informants, especially since I did not have permission to record them secretly. Lastly, as a married woman and a mother to small children, I had time and mobility constraints because of my 'domestic duties'.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme one states that education should be considered a head start to success and change. Although various literacy initiatives have been launched and several education projects aimed at girls have been introduced, illiteracy remains pervasive in rural regions (e.g., in Bouadel community, it increased with the rate of 22.47% from 60.3% (in 2004) to reach 82.77% (in 2010), compared to Ain Mediouna community that decreased from 62.8% (in 2004) to 19% (in 2010). Also, there cannot be a significant shift in a society as a result of basic level education (Table 3 and 4).

Theme two highlights the issue of underage marriage among girls in rural areas. The prevalence of Article 20 in Morocco's Family Code has exacerbated the impact of this phenomenon, which continues to be a major concern. This legal provision contributes to the persistence of child marriages, posing obstacles to the well-being and prosperity of young girls in these regions. It is worth mentioning that efforts to address this issue require a holistic approach that takes into account both legislative reforms and the active involvement of the community. The prevalence of Article 20 of the Family Code continues to exacerbate the issue in these regions. Theme three depicts rural women's dispute with their bodies. These women aggravate the outcomes of onerous work they perform by not giving attention to their health (Tables 5 and 6). Theme four examines the tendency of women living in rural areas to rely on saints and superstitions as a means of dealing with and resisting the different difficulties they face. This reliance on traditional remedies, as noted by Ennaji and Sadiqi (2008), serves to alleviate psychological and social issues.

Tasks in the rural areas fall essentially into two intermingled categories of a continuum of everyday monotonous and menial chores: housework and

agricultural work. Last theme revolves around rural women and girls' attitudes of internal migration. International migration is not very common in these areas. The males' migration does not give women self-determination and autonomy over their lives. In contrary, they become more supervised by other male family members. Even though it may happen, it is only temporary until the return of the migrant. All members of the family become tutors of the wife and girls the migrant had left in the village.

Table 3. The illiteracy in Bouadel rural community

	Females	Males
National level (2004)	74.5	46
Provincial level (2004)	76.4	43.3
Community level (2004)	60.3	23.5
Community level (2010)	82.77	17.23

Source: High Commission for Planning - 2004 Census and Information System Research of the Community, 2010

Table 4. The evolution of illiteracy rate in Ain Mediouna rural community (2004-2010)

	Females	Males
National level (2004)	74.5	46
Provincial level (2004)	76.4	43.3
Community level (2004)	62.8	29.7
Community level (2010)	19	04

Source: High Commission for Planning (2004), Census and Information System Research of the Community, 2010

The first finding reveals that women's status is contradictory. In some situations, they are considered 'major', like when traversing kilometers to arrive to fields and fetch water or grass alone, or even share haulage to work in remote farms. Whereas, in other cases, they are 'minor' who need tutorship, as in the case of joining travelers in the same transport means to reach school or a mixed classroom.

The second salient finding shows that rural women's roles are (self)-underestimated, and thus, their labor is often neither paid nor regarded as work (Table 2) and treated as less important both by men and official statistics. Nonetheless, the worst is that women themselves underrate their efforts. Their sense of powerlessness is ever present though there is a hyper-exploitation of their efforts without their consent.

The third makes it clear that there are links between gender and development in the rural area. Women are central to the rural development by means of their triple role in society -reproduction, production and community work- in every activity. Also, it is highly clear that there is a reciprocal relationship between education, work, health and development. The former is indeed in the heart of the latter, it is a cause and a product at the same time. It contributes to the improvement of health and a passport to work.

Table 5. Health of pregnant women in Ain Mediouna

Particulars	Values (%)
Number of women benefiting from 'childbirth house' as it is non-existent	0.00
Rate of pregnant women benefiting from medical consultation before childbirth	4.30
Rate of women benefiting from medical consultation after childbirth	2.37

Source: Dispensary of the Rural Community Ain Mediouna, 2010.

Table 6: Health of pregnant women in Bouadel

Women benefiting from 'childbirth house'		Childbirths in other places		Childbirths in a sanitary place		Childbirths declared
Number	Ratio	Number	Ratio	Number	Ratio	
0	0	15	13.51	0	0	111

Source: Dispensary of the Rural Community Bouadel, 2010.

The fourth finding depicts that there was an agreement on the harshness of life rural women lead, in the absence of infrastructure and prior necessities for making life easier. The rural population, specifically women and girls, live in dire conditions; they suffer from harshness of the nature and marginalization. Their work burdens amount is concurrently shouldered with the repeatedly incessant processes of child-bearing, breastfeeding and care

The fifth salient finding is the strength rural women are characterized with. Despite being disempowered due to many factors, they are courageous and strong enough to lead on onerous life in silence and endurance. They carry out their so-called 'women's duties' in addition to men's work. An example of this is their capacity to succeed in managing their time- in the absence of appropriate infrastructure.

4 CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

In summary, it is important to consider that women living in rural areas experience victimization on various levels. These include geographical factors such as harsh living conditions due to isolation and extreme weather, patriarchal treatment within the family, societal discrimination and stereotyping, and government policies that result in marginalization. This marginalization can be attributed to insufficient infrastructure and developmental programs, inadequate follow-up on the implementation of these initiatives, and a lack of recognition of rural women's contributions.

More importantly, rural women are heterogeneous-geographically, culturally and socioeconomically¹. Then, their needs should be approached differently. Considering all that proceeds, the real challenge is getting men and women to shift their priorities away from basic and practical needs and towards strategic ones². If there is to be a substantial change, these needs must be met. This can only be accomplished gradually by educating and sensitizing the public. In order to do

this, there is a need for an intellectual revolution that will accompany, support, and facilitate the execution of the changes.

Therefore, I dare declare that "while it is believed that people need to 'change' in order to have a 'chance' to take a 'choice', rural women and girls should first be allowed and helped to have a 'choice' to take a 'chance' in order to make 'change' in their lives." In a personal interview with a former Parliament Deputy in 2005, she maintained that: "it is with rural women where there is the maximum of deficit concerning women's rights. The improvement of their situation is maybe the most important objective, and the day we succeed to achieve it, we can say that we have succeeded in the development of our country". One way to achieve this is to involve them in decision-making. [Zaoude \(1993\)](#), on the other hand, claims that the time has come for women to move beyond being the 'on the agenda' and to start 'setting the agenda'.

In reality, there is no template solution that can be universally applied in rural areas. Each resolution has to create opportunities tailored to specific situations. Then, listening to rural women is essential if we are to understand their problems and identify appropriate and effective solutions to be overcome. Actually, there is no development without enhancing rural women's life conditions, where there should be several goals, where women should be the focus of all.

Finally, some of the most pressing needs for rural areas in general include improved infrastructure such as roads, water systems, health facilities, and schools, as well as the development of industries. Rural women in particular need female places such as clubs for literacy, training, enlightenment, and even sport clubs. They require kindergartens for their kids (who are most of the time an impediment to learning) and labor-saving techniques (modern technology) as well. However, when making policies for young rural girls, the main focus should be on education and schooling, as this is

the key to solving many problems in society, as stated by Nelson Mandela: "Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world"³. Then, education should be the head start. Regrettably, despite the fact that illiteracy appears to be increasingly common in terms of languages and ICT ability, we are still unsure of how to solve illiteracy connected to reading and writing in the native language.

NOTES

1. I thank the reviewers for their valuable comment regarding the need for empirical evidence to support my statement about rural women's heterogeneity..... Unfortunately, due to the shortness of time and the scope and focus of the paper, I am unable to provide empirical evidence in the above paragraphs. However, I acknowledge that this is an important area for further research, and I encourage future studies to explore the heterogeneity of rural women in more depth.
2. Strategic needs comprise self-esteem needs, appropriate and relevant educational needs, training and literacy needs, modern technology needs, and access to resources amongst others.
3. A statement by Nelson Mandela, which has been disseminated through multiple channels such as speeches, interviews, and books.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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