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Redefining Rural Realities: Unveiling Gender Dynamics, Empowerment, and Female Labor in Morocco's Countryside

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Abstract
Gender, female labor, and empowerment constitute focal points of scholarly inquiry due to their profound implications for women's lives. Within the context of rural Morocco, where women face distinctive challenges, governmental and NGO-driven empowerment initiatives have emerged to address these issues. Employing an intersectional lens, this article critically examines existing academic discourse surrounding gender, female labor, and empowerment in Moroccan rural areas. Through a systematic analysis, it delves into the manifestations and constructions of gender, the accessibility of employment opportunities for women, societal perceptions of female labor, and the efficacy of empowerment policies designed to elevate women's status within rural communities. By addressing these inquiries, the article contributes to a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in gender dynamics, labor participation, and empowerment initiatives in rural Moroccan contexts.

Keywords: Gender dynamics, empowerment, empowerment strategies, female labor, Middle Atlas.

Introduction

Gender, female labour, and empowerment have garnered considerable scholarly attention due to their profound impact on women's lives. Gender, as a pivotal determinant of women's life trajectories, intricately intertwines with their labour and empowerment. In light of the challenges faced by women residing in rural regions of Morocco, the Moroccan government and certain NGOs have devised empowerment policies to address these issues. The objective of this article is to critically assess the perspectives presented in academic studies on gender, female labour, and empowerment in Moroccan rural areas. Several key inquiries will be explored: how is gender manifested and shaped in the context of Morocco's rural regions? What opportunities for employment are accessible to women in these areas? How is female labour perceived within rural communities? Lastly, what are the specific empowerment policies that have been formulated to bolster the status of women in these rural settings?

1. Gender in the Rural Areas of the Middle Atlas

Since gender refers to "the socially produced attributes of masculinity and femininity and social arrangements based upon these attributes" (Bryson & Campling, 1999, p. 46), the rural areas in the Middle Atlas are known for the strict socio-cultural norms that govern women's lives. In their ideologically-driven article studying prostitution in the Middle Atlas, Bakker and Venema (2004) [35] demonstrate that there is "a high degree of gender segregation, with women having a world of their own, and being idle [and] submissive" (p. 52). In a stringent manner, this judgmental perspective reveals that women residing in the Middle Atlas region are expected to exhibit qualities of submissiveness, fragility, and docility. However, contrasting viewpoints presented by Mernissi (1994) [27] Mernissi and Moghadam (1990) [29] suggest that there are no rigid boundaries separating the roles of men and women, as women actively engage in tasks traditionally associated with men. In light of this, the chapter seeks to address several questions. Firstly, it explores how gender has been constructed and portrayed in literature concerning women in the Middle Atlas. Secondly, it delves into society's perception of women's roles. Lastly, it investigates the policies aimed at empowering women in these specific regions.

This judgmental perspective rigidly indicates that women living in the Middle Atlas region are expected to demonstrate characteristics of submissiveness, fragility, and docility. However, differing viewpoints from Mernissi (1994) [27] Mernissi and Moghadam (1990) [29] challenge the notion of strict gender roles, as they argue that women actively undertake tasks traditionally associated with men. The evidence from Mernissi's (1982) [26] study of gender in a village located in the Gharb region underlines that women's social role has been correlated with "marriage, procreation, childbearing, farming, growing plants, fetching water and firewood, fishing, making bread, and caring for the animals" (intro); men's social role has been associated with breadwinning, schooling, working, and decision-making. These values and attitudes are constructed and normalized mainly in marriage and family, two powerful institutions that decide on women's way of life.

Continuing with the same argument, the division between private and public spaces in the Middle Atlas is closely linked to the regulation of women's movement, often constrained by their reproductive capacity. Due to the emphasis on procreation within the culture, certain scholars, notably Maher (1974) [24], assert that women are socialized to perceive serving and caring for their children as an inevitable obligation. In this social context, Maher (1974) [24] states that "today in the Middle Atlas contraception is rarely practiced, and a woman's children may range in age from three to twenty so that there are always children around her, dependent on her for care and attention and greatly reducing her mobility" (p. 107). Maher's claim assumes here some feminists' standpoint which suggests that caring is the unpaid work of kin within the private domain of their family (Graham, 1991) [21]. According to Maher's perspective, the expectation for women to care for their families in Moroccan society is viewed as an oppressive imposition. Contrarily, this perception overlooks the essential role of care and undervalues the significance of caregiving in Arab societies. In Moroccan culture, care and procreation play a crucial role in fostering strong familial bonds among its members. While caring is a fundamental need in all societies, particularly in the context of world, it is essential to avoid burdening women disproportionately with caregiving responsibilities.

This societal norm is intertwined with the esteemed concept of motherhood, which posits that women's primary honourable duty is to nurture children and ensure their well-being and achievements. Additionally, in Moroccan culture, women place significant importance on having children as a means to ensure the continuation of their marriage, a value that conflicts with state-led family planning initiatives (Bourqia, 2002) [7]. As a result, women willingly forgo their mobility in favour of their children, and any deviation from this norm is met with disgrace and social ostracization. Bakker and Venema (2004) [35] accentuate that in the Middle Atlas, "women who break the norms for their gender are subjected to social reprobation and occupy a marginal position in society" (p. 52). Hence, women's time is predominantly spent at home because of their roles as mothers, sisters, or daughters. In this vein, de Hass and Rooij (2010) [13] add that:

Gender relations in rural Morocco in general are based on strong patriarchal principles, implying that men dominate household decision-making. This coincides with a tendency towards spatial separation, in which women's lives are largely restricted to the domestic domain, while the public domain is largely reserved for men. (p. 48).

De Hass and Rooij (2010) [13] argue in the aforementioned quotation that men have historically dominated the public sphere based on the stereotype that they are more rational and better decision-makers. Furthermore, the distinction between public and private spaces is shaped by the physical attributes assigned to each gender. Consequently, due to the perception that men are physically stronger, they are assigned tasks outside the home and are less likely to encounter harassment and violence in those spaces.

Nevertheless, the study Maher (1974) [24] conducted in the Middle Atlas region reveals that the spatial separation of domestic/public domains is not fixed, especially in rural areas. Based on observation of Maher (1974) [24], men are responsible for all activities of the public space, namely dealing with the different institutions such as schools and offices. Conversely, women are recommended "to fetch water morning and evening from the stream, which is rarely more than a few hundred meters away, to bake bread twice a day, and cook meals for the family, mostly of the stew variety, or a soup of pulses" (Maher, 1974 [24], p. 110). What this quote underlines is that women in rural areas are exposed to public space more than men. Instead, the tasks women perform outside the home are usually held to be no more than a continuation of housework. In the Southern region of Morocco, David and Leonel (2019) find that women's outside tasks are "regarded as an extension of domestic work and unlikely to lead to any form of economic empowerment" (p. 11).

Notwithstanding, men and women may switch roles in temporary cases. Maher (1974) [24] notes, "I have seen men baking bread of barley for a stomach ailment, and making coffee in their wife's absence" (p.112). This quotation illustrates that social norms are flexible in either men's or women's absence. However, the study of Bakker and Venema (2004) [35] discloses that "women who cross the boundaries by working, remaining single, or entering the public sphere are stigmatized" (p. 52). Their presence in the public sphere exposes them to constant scrutiny and gossip from the male gaze, leading to feelings of discomfort and a lack of confidence in venturing outside the confines of their homes.

The gender norms described above are instilled and conveyed through various institutions from a very young age. Girls growing up in rural areas of the Middle Atlas undergo socialization processes that align their behaviour with the prevailing societal norms. Maher (1974) [24] articulates that "a girl's mother-centeredness persists until she dies, and all her childhood activities are conditioned by a working relationship between them which begins at a very early stage in the girl's life" (p. 107). Both girls and boys are influenced by societal norms that dictate their behaviour. Girls are expected to dedicate their time to household chores and caring for children, including their siblings, nephews, and nieces. On the other hand, boys are encouraged to focus on acquiring skills and competencies associated with manhood. From an early age, boys are taught to conform to socially constructed ideals of manhood, which encompass traits such as responsibility, strength, virility, and dominance. Failure to embody these characteristics puts their manhood at risk. This is consistent with one of Gaibazzi's (2010) [20] interviewees who declares that: "To be a man is to be self-reliant, to have and circulate money. Being broke (*koriye*) comes close to social immobility: inability to be autonomous and to help people, inability to fulfil social obligations to maintain parents and wife, even the inability to have a voice in personal and family matters" (p. 218). That is why, from a societal perspective, the

failure "of a husband to provide his wife with adequate food, clothes, and shelter" (Maher, 1974, p. 199) is a convincing reason to go for divorce.

The transmission of social norms, values, and beliefs takes place through various mechanisms, including Quranic schools. These small institutions play a crucial part in shaping gender roles for both boys and girls. Hence, most people in rural areas depend on them for their children's education. In Sunpu do Xati, for instance, Gaibazzi (2010) [20] explains that "traditional Quranic schools do not envision learning for girls beyond childhood" (p. 152). To put it differently, the curriculum of Quranic schools solely focuses on teaching girls basic literacy skills such as reading, writing, and appropriate behaviour. The concept of pursuing higher education or building a career is almost absent from their teachings. Moreover, the ideas conveyed in Quranic schools fail to equip both girls and boys with critical thinking abilities and the capacity for independent thought, productivity, and creativity.

Regarding the construction of gender norms in the rural regions of the Middle Atlas, Bakker and Venema (2004) [35] conducted a study on this matter. Despite the prevalent binary portrayal of Amazigh and Arab women, their research stands as the sole reference available in the context of the Middle Atlas, as far as our knowledge extends. According to them, in the regions of the Middle Atlas, there is a belief that Amazigh-speaking women enjoy more autonomy and freedom than Arab-speaking women (Shorfa). According to Bakker and Venema (2004) [35], some Amazigh-speaking women are not actual practitioners of Islam (a religion that has been introduced/imposed on them by Arabs), for they enjoy more freedom than Arab women. An in-depth analysis of this study unveils the Orientalist point of view of Bakker and Venema. Their statement tells us that as long as women are distanced from religious prescriptions (the case of Amazigh women), they are more liberal regarding virginity, sexual liberties, seclusion, and veiling. Equally important, according to Bakker and Venema (2004) [35], "female dancers and singers at local ceremonies are considered valued folk artists who have an important role at festivities" (p. 52). This so-called category of folk artists, according to society, is dishonourable and shameful, yet "they can marry or remarry and be an accepted member of society" (p. 52). Unlike other parts of Morocco, dancers and singers in the Middle Atlas are part and parcel noteworthy components of the culture. Mcmurray (2001) [25] explains that "women learned early in life to clap, dance, sing, and play various drums and tambourines to entertain themselves at in-home parties" (p. 83). They even acquire "reputations as good performers with extensive knowledge of the repertoire of rhythms common in the area" (p. 83). In the rural regions of Nador, where the dominant language is Tarifit (a variant of Tamazight), women are not only actively encouraged to engage in dancing and singing but are also highly regarded and admired for their skilful performances and in-depth understanding of rhythms..

Michael Peyron.*et al* (2018) [32], a specialist in Berber language, literature, and culture, offers a distinct perspective on the subject of gender construction in the Middle Atlas. In his study on gender and women's rights in the region, Peyron's approach differs from that of other scholars. He argues that globalization has brought about noticeable changes in the situation of women, illuminating their lives and fostering awareness about women's rights and equality with men. Despite their illiteracy, Peyron, Gray, and Sonneveld (2018) [32] suggest that women in the Middle Atlas are now well-positioned to challenge long-established conservative ideas concerning gender relations, thanks to advancements in technology and transportation that have facilitated the dissemination of information about women's issues. In this context, according to Peyron. *et al* (2018) [32], local women, inspired by their urban counterparts, have experienced a newfound sense of empowerment, leading them to assert their rights and reject mistreatment, including domestic violence, from their husbands. Additionally, NGOs operating in the Middle Atlas region have played a significant role in promoting gender equality and empowerment. Peyron, Gray, and Sonneveld (2018) [32] observe that NGOs like the Akhiam Association in Agoudal have been actively involved in supporting and guiding women in the Middle Atlas to establish small businesses, such as carpet weaving and bread-making, enabling them to generate their own modest income. In such a way, these NGOs have proven to raise awareness among women and empower them by encouraging them to work to secure an income for themselves and reduce the economic duties of their husbands. They have also created "social dynamism through the mobilization and participation of the oppressed" (Ennaji, 2016 [18], p. 3). Moreover, "their modes of action raise new challenges for government development policies and open up new avenues of thinking about the issues of sustainability" (Ennaji, 2016 [18], p. 3).

Thus, globalization, migration, and tourism have significantly influenced, and in some cases, challenged established gender norms and local practices. The findings presented by Bakker and Venema (2004) [35] and McMurray (2001) [25] indicate two key points. Firstly, women are not a homogenous group, as some exhibit greater adaptability to change influenced by globalization and migration. Secondly, social norms impact women differently due to diverse factors governing their lives, including traditions, religion, origin, class, kinship, and employment type. Thus, the evidence provided demonstrates that gender stereotypes do not uniformly affect women due to the wide array of variables shaping their experiences.

In conclusion, gender in Morocco has historically been represented by some scholars as a fixed set of norms and beliefs. However, the question which poses itself is: what results will we have if we consider religion, geographic location, ethnicity, and other factors in the study of gender construction? This question will help at illustrating later in following chapters how those variables would affect gender construction and women's empowerment. The following section aims to gauge the most known empowerment strategies suggested to improve women's lives in rural areas by finding answers to the following question: To what extent have empowerment plans and strategies impacted women's lives in rural areas?

2. Women's Empowerment in Morocco

The exclusion of rural women from the economic sector presents a significant drawback in the economies of many countries. This lower economic status of women compared to men is a result of systematic policies, biased political economies, and cultural norms and traditions that favour men in economic opportunities. The available job opportunities for women in rural areas, such as agriculture, textile, garment, and household work, often fall under the informal labour category, limiting their contribution to the country's macroeconomics. Additionally, these women are not recognized as active participants or reliable contributors to their countries' economies. Despite some progress in education, with more girls in rural areas pursuing university studies, the overall mean years of schooling remain limited

due to factors such as early marriage, poverty, geographic constraints, lack of transportation, and insufficient school funding. Consequently, women's unemployment remains high despite the "accelerated nature of the social changes" (Moghadam, 2007 [30], p. 77) that globalization engenders. In an alternative phrasing, despite the impact of globalization on social norms and the emergence of new perspectives regarding women's economic empowerment, women still face significant barriers when trying to enter the economic sector. These obstacles include issues related to gender, education, and social class.

Numerous global initiatives and strategies have been proposed to empower women comprehensively, with a particular focus on economic empowerment. This process is envisioned to lead women towards a dignified livelihood, self-fulfilment, and self-actualization. Achieving economic empowerment necessitates women's active participation in the public sphere. Various international development programs have been instrumental in advancing women's economic citizenship and fostering their empowerment. Notable examples include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Charter of Women Workers Rights of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the International Labour Organization, the International Covenant on Economic, Cultural, and Social Rights (ICESCR), the Beijing Platform for Action, Structural Adjustment Programs, Action Plan for Integrating Women in Development (PANIFD), and the Family Code. The Platform for Action (1995), for instance, suggests in article 58 that governments need to begin:

To analyse, from a gender perspective, policies and programs-including those related to macroeconomic stability, structural adjustment, external debt problems, taxation, investments, employment, markets and all relevant sectors of the economy-with respect to their impact on poverty, on inequality and particularly on women; to assess their impact on family well-being and conditions and to adjust them, as appropriate, to promote more equitable distribution of productive assets, wealth, opportunities, income and services. (p.20) Strictly speaking, this section explores the four platforms that have been designed for women's empowerment in Morocco. It aims to provide some answers to the following questions: what is the role of these programs and platforms in women's lives? To what extent do these programs and platforms impact women's lives in Morocco, particularly women in rural Morocco?

2.1 Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs)

Generally, the crisis of the 1980s that impacted low and middle-income-nations was the leading cause behind the prominence of structural adjustment programs introduced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Thomson, Kentikelenis, and Stubbs (2017) [33] confirm that "structural adjustment loans are provided to countries in dire fiscal or macroeconomic straits" (p. 2). Structural adjustment programs are based on four key principles of neoliberalism, namely economic stabilization, liberalization, deregulation, and privatization. As Thomson *et al*., (2017) [33] explain:

Stabilisation refers to policies which seek to limit fluctuations in exchange rates, inflation, and balance-of-payments. Liberalisation encompasses measures designed to facilitate the free flow of trade and capital, such as the removal of tariffs. Deregulation involves the removal of governmental 'red-tape' vis-à-vis business practices, such as stipulations in employment relations law. Finally, privatisation describes the transferal of enterprise from state to private ownership, thereby fostering competition and market efficiencies. (p. 3)

These programs plan to reduce the role of the state but more essentially to adopt "neoliberal-or market-led-growth strategies, to be promoted globally via both direct stipulations in loan agreements and advisory influence more generally" (Thomson *et al*., 2017 [33], p. 3). In return, recipient countries need to improve macroeconomic and fiscal policies following a neoliberal rubric and conception of economic development.

As for structural adjustment policies targeting women's participation and development in the economy, important decisions have been made. In the 1980s, Morocco started to make some structural adjustment programs in order to improve the economic environment and to boost women's participation and integration in the economy. Indeed, the effects of the structural adjustment policies made in this regard "have encouraged an increase in female labour-force participation, partly in response to the availability of opportunities in the paid labour force, but mainly due to the financial needs of households" (Moghadam, 1998 [28], p. 236). Consequently, structural adjustment programs have garnered favourable recognition from the public, associations, and organizations for their commendable objectives concerning women's economic empowerment. Accordingly, this section specifically focuses on the subset of structural adjustment programs designed to facilitate the integration and advancement of women in the economy. The central questions in this context are the following: what are structural adjustment programs? Whom do they target? To what extent have structural adjustment programs been inclusive of women in rural Morocco? To approach these questions, Moghadam's analysis of the structural adjustment programs suggested by the Moroccan government proves to be relevant here.

Adopting a gender approach to programs and action plans has given rise to "policy recommendations either that there be poverty alleviation or employment-generation programs designed specifically for women or that households maintained by women alone be targeted for social programs" (Moghadam, 1998 [28], p. 227). Given that women are more vulnerable to poverty (the feminization of poverty), structural adjustment programs have been designed to alleviate poverty by creating job opportunities for women. The primary objectives are twofold: first, to foster women's autonomy and independence; and second, to transform them into valuable contributors to their country's macroeconomics. Given Morocco's history of openness to foreign investments and political liberalization, the country initiated structural adjustment programs aimed at addressing the urgent necessity of women's participation in the economy. Consequently, in 2006, there was a notable shift from public sector dominance to the rise of privatized institutions. Morocco also granted legal permissions to Europeans to invest in hotels, holiday homes, and resorts, thereby creating a liberalized economy that allowed foreign interventions and investments to facilitate women's integration into economic sectors, particularly in goods, textiles, and garments industries. By 2002, 87 firms, including hotels, had been privatized. In 2006, it was announced that agreements between Morocco and the EU would include not only goods but also agriculture and services.

Nevertheless, at the national level, structural adjustment programs start to gain notoriety among the Moroccan public, institutions, associations, and organizations alike because they have only "aggravated the processes of democratization and

the gap between the rich and poor" (Cook, 2007 [12], p. 188). Indeed, many third world countries, among them Morocco, have become obliged to pay the servicing debt from their export earnings. If the money is not sufficient enough, the government borrows more money to pay the debt. Researchers argue that, "such adjustment comes at a high social cost, while the recidivist nature of program participation also suggests that gains to macroeconomic stability are underwhelming" (Thomson *et al*., 2017 [33], p. 2). This brought about grave consequences in the microeconomic level, viz. "increase of unemployment (16%), stagnation of salaries, low level of education and health services (Ennaji, 2008 [17], p. 340). Moghadam (1998) [28] claims that due to structural adjustment programs, "the changes in food prices have particularly affected the "borderline" poor, increasing their vulnerability. The changes in the labour market and wages have led often to the impoverishment of the working classes, giving rise to the "new" poor or the "working poor"" (p. 237). Structural adjustment programs have, indeed, worsened the situation of women and impacted their lives in an obvious negative way. This negative impact is a result of several factors. It is worth quoting Moghadam (1998) [28] at some length in this context:

First, customary biases and intrahousehold inequalities lead to lower consumption by and fewer benefits for women and girls among lower-income groups. Second, women's geographic and occupational mobility is constrained by family and childrearing responsibilities. Third, the legal and customary frameworks often do not treat women as autonomous citizens but rather as dependents or minors-with the result that in many countries, women cannot own or inherit property, or seek a job or take out a loan without the permission of their husband or father. Fourth, labor-market discrimination and occupational segregation result in women being concentrated in the low-wage employment sectors, the informal sector, and the contingent of "flexible labor". (p. 239).

All these factors have hampered the implementation of structural adjustment programs. They have also deteriorated the situation of Moroccan women in general and rural women in particular, because they are the ones responsible for household maintenance and budgeting. In the same line of thought, Ennaji (2008) [17] has also listed many factors such as:

Illiteracy, lack of education and information, lack of technical and professional training, weak resources available to them, difficult access to loans, weak participation in public life and weak or lack of representation in the spheres of policy and policy-making, unfavorable legal status, and weakness in the capacity of organization and associations of women. (p. 343)

That is why poverty among women in rural areas remains massive. In this context, Ennaji (2008) [17] declares that "the socio-economic situation of women is generally alarming; women seem to be more struck by poverty than men, a fact that indicates inequality of the sexes" (p. 345).

Additionally, as a result of prevailing stereotypes portraying women as less assertive or demanding compared to men, they frequently encounter lower wages in employment. This marginalization or exploitation stems directly from gender-based and social ideologies that are widespread in relation to women as a whole. In this regard, Henrici, according to Moghadam, (2007) [30] believes that "gender ideology allows women workers' vulnerability to persist" (p. 81). In the same line of argument, Ennaji (2008) [17] asserts that structural adjustment programs "have introduced changes that reinforced gender inequality at the economic and political levels, which enhanced women's dependence on the State to protect their rights and foster their participation in active life" (p. 343). Abu-Lughod (2009) [2] also claims that "structural adjustment is recognized not to have been accompanied by growth in the private-sector's capacity to generate jobs for women" (p. 91). Women remain excluded from labour due to the prejudices and stereotypes that restrict their lives to the private space. Ennaji (2008) [17] asserts that "the relative retreat of the state from the economic scene as the main agent of change undermined its commitment to gender equality" (p. 345). And even when women challenge social norms, they always find it difficult "to adapt to the jobs available to them in the private sector" (Assaad, El-Hamidi, Ahmed, 2000, p. 39). So, gender inequalities impede the changes that may occur for the benefit of women, and which are usually in form of programs and action plans.

On their part, scholars, academics, activists, program and action plan researchers, and planners highlight the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or what Abu-Lughod refers to as "safety net" to improve women's living conditions. NGOs are created to help women live in better conditions by boosting their economic and financial situation. Ennaji (2008) [17] explains that many Moroccan NGOs:

help mostly illiterate rural women to sell the rugs and other textiles they weave on the Internet, which could provide a solution to the perennial problem of marketing the products of isolated rural women. This measure allows women to increase their revenues as well as obtain some degree of empowerment. (p. 346).

NGOs are founded to intervene whenever the situation is critical despite their complicated relation with the State. Moghadam (2007) [30] states that NGOs "engage in advocacy, lobbying, and coalition-building to enhance women's participation and rights" (p. 78). She continues to say that, "though largely constituted by women of the elite social groups, women's organizations in the Maghreb evince a kind of social feminism that calls for the enhancement of social rights as well as civil and political rights" (p. 78).

To conclude, this section discussed the effects of the government and non-government organizations' structural adjustment programs on the economic status of Moroccan women. These initiatives were implemented to enhance the economic well-being of women in Morocco. Besides these programs, the Moroccan government and non-government organizations also adopted other measures, such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Moroccan Family Code, to improve the social and economic conditions of women's daily lives.

2.2 Beijing Platform for Action

Undoubtedly, the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) has exerted a significant influence on the lives of women globally. It has instigated numerous transformations in the realms of economics, politics, society, and culture, all aimed at fostering women's self-fulfilment, personal growth, and self-realization. Central to this platform are the vital and urgent objectives of enhancing women's agency, empowerment, and overall development. The Beijing Platform for Action perceives empowerment as a valuable strategy in advancing women's development. Declaration section 13 of the Platform proclaims that, "women's empowerment and their full participation based on equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for achieving equality, development, and peace". In this way, the attainment of

women's empowerment will eventually lead to gender equality, development and peace in all societies.

Morocco has consistently shown receptiveness to various reforms and conventions aimed at enhancing women's empowerment in the realms of economy, politics, and society. However, it is acknowledged that the actual implementation of these initiatives has not been as satisfactory as desired. Given this fact, Article 21 in Beijing Platform for Action insists on implementing the Platform of Action which "requires commitment from Governments and the international community". Thus, Moroccan government and international communities are charged with the responsibility to superintend the execution of the articles suggested by the Platform. In this vein, Elliott (2014) [16] confirms that the declarations of the Platform for Action "strongly manifest Morocco's adherence to universally recognized human rights standards, at least in principle, while at the same time reveal inconsistencies in the country's working definition of an individual and her rights and obligations" (p. 15). This demonstrates the Moroccan government's comprehension of the profound influence that gender has on women's lives and its cognizance of the critical implications associated with gender inequalities in Morocco, which include "economic exploitation, including the feminization of poverty and the commoditization of women in the media; sexual violence, including sexual assault, wife assault, and psychological abuse" (Cook, 2007 [12], p. 186).

Given that economic empowerment stands as a crucial goal for women, the Platform for Action dedicates multiple articles specifically urging for women's economic independence and stability. Accordingly, article 35 promotes women's access to and control over "some economic resources such as "land, credit, science and technology, vocational training, information, communication, and markets" to reduce poverty which slows down and hampers their independence and freedom. Consequently, unless women possess the necessary awareness, courage, and determination to access these economic resources, achieving their emancipation becomes a challenging endeavour. Article 26 also suggests addressing changes in economic structures to ensure "equal access for all women, including those in rural areas, as vital development agents, to productive resources, opportunities, and public services". Nonetheless, as is commonly observed, the primary beneficiaries tend to be women from urban regions who have access to lifelong education, various resources, and healthcare facilities. Consequently, the Platform does not adequately cater to and address the needs of all women globally, despite the impression that it aims to do so.

Again, article 16 asserts that the eradication of poverty is based on "sustained economic growth, social development, environmental protection, and social justice". To achieve these objectives, men and women should have access to "full and equal participation to economic and social development as agents and beneficiaries of people-centered sustainable development" (Article 16). To achieve the aforementioned objectives, it is imperative to ensure an equitable provision of necessities for women in rural communities. In essence, while women may be perceived as a homogenous group, it is crucial to provide all of them with the fundamental necessities of life without any bias or favouritism. Nevertheless, the use of terms such as social justice and social developments in rural areas, where the basic needs of life are almost lacking and the cultural traditions are omnipotent, seems to be inadequate and irrelevant as they only draw "an optimistic picture of a widely desired future" (Abu-Lughod, 2009, p. 86). In this respect, Abu-Lughod (2009) [2] overtly argues that as "an anthropologist who has worked closely with women in rural communities, I was uncomfortable with what seemed to be a cosmopolitan or urban middle-class perspective on women's lives, aspirations, and everyday conditions" (p. 86).

Evidently, the declarations made in the Platform indicate a lack of profound comprehension regarding both the Arab world and the specific situation of Arab women, particularly those residing in rural areas. This lack of awareness and understanding results in the misrepresentation of these women. By disregarding the diverse contexts in which these women live, their unique struggles, experiences, and priorities, the Platform offers inefficient, inadequate, and clumsy solutions to address the challenges faced by rural women. Consequently, while the Beijing declarations emphasize the principle that factors such as race, age, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability, location, or level of education should not create divisions among women, it appears that the Platform does not fully take these factors into account. As a result, the solutions proposed by the Platform tend to be discriminatory, relegating women in rural areas to a second-class status.

To clarify this point, the Platform, for example, seeks "to provide stepping-stones to genuine economic self-sufficiency for poor women in two key areas: employment-related education and training and access to higher education" (Dill & Zambrana, 2009 [14], p. 170) which women in rural areas find hard to realize due to poverty, geographical location, and lack of facilities and transportation. So, more attention is given to the inequalities that exist between men and women and not between women themselves. Thus, overlooking or missing the fact that "knowing nothing yet about the process involved in producing the document, including the debates, negotiations, and pressures that led to the final text" (Abu-Lughod, 2009 [2], p. 86) puts into question the extent to which these platforms and others are ideologically free and untainted.

In conclusion, despite the universal and general nature of most declarations, with a lack of profound analysis of diverse contexts where women reside, the Platform has nonetheless introduced some changes that feminists, governments, and scholars find commendable. The Platform has positively impacted women's lives in various ways. Presently, more women are participating in parliamentary and political affairs, achieving economic independence, demonstrating proficiency in technology and social media usage, and excelling as debaters in a wide range of subjects and domains.

2.3 Action Plan for Integrating Women in Development (PANIFD)

In response to the recommendations made during the Beijing Conference in 1995, the Action Plan for Integrating Women in Development (PANIFD) was formulated in 1999 as a government initiative with significant involvement from civil society organizations and Moroccan feminism. The Moroccan feminist movement conducted numerous investigations and consultations, leading to the initiation of the Action Plan by Minister Mohamed Said Saadi, a member of the left-wing Parti du Progrés et du Socialisme (PPS), which is linked to the Association Marocaine pour les Droits des Femmes (ADFM). With the change in government and the adoption of a gender approach in 1998, the project provided fresh perspectives and solutions to address the issues concerning women and development. The gender approach was employed to identify discriminatory social mechanisms contributing to women's

oppression, marginalization, and exclusion in all aspects of life. This approach was suggested as an analytical tool to examine existing programs related to women and development, as well as a planning tool to ensure policies consider the socio-cultural, economic, and political conditions governing men and women's relationships. So, the "authors of the plan expressly linked their projects to United Nations declaration, especially to resolutions adopted at 1995 women's Conference in Beijing" (Buskens, 2003 [9], p.84).

The creation of the Action Plan for Integrating Women in Development (PANIFD) resulted from a series of failures, including the ineffectiveness of the technocratic approach to social development, the inability of public policies to improve women's situation since independence, and the lack of progress in advocating for women's rights through prolonged debates, round-table discussions, and meetings. The emergence of PANIFD was significantly influenced by organizations such as the World Bank, the Union for Women's Action (UAF), the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (ADFM), and the Moroccan Women's Democratic Association (AMDF). The main objectives of this Action Plan were centred on four essential issues concerning women: their economic development and integration, literacy, reproductive health, and legislative rights. Thus, in 1999 PANIFD became "the document for the reform that the government was meant to adopt" (Cavatorta, 2009 [11], p. 497).

Indubitably, the Plan generated advocates and opponents. In Rabat on March 12, 2000, ADFM organized a march to support PANIFD. In parallel with this manifestation, the Lhidn association, which was mainly composed of supporters of Islamic thought and views, organized a large counter march in Casablanca against the Plan, "advocating for an Islamic reference and cultural relativism" (Feather, 2017 [19], p. 41). PANIFD faced notable resistance from Islamist factions, particularly under the leadership of the minister of Habous and Religious Affairs. These groups skilfully utilized mosques and magazines as potent means to counter the Action Plan, asserting that its proponents relied predominantly on secular women's organizations, while entirely disregarding Islamic actors in the process (Ytre-Arne, 2016) [36].

The Plan was perceived by Islamists as a dire threat that would dismantle the traditional Islamic norms prevailing in Moroccan society. In this regard, Castillejo and Tilley (2015) [10] declare that "PJD has also opposed the National Plan of Action to Integrate Women in Development (PANIFD) and the reform of the *Moudawana*, which they see as a threat to traditional family life" (p. 31).The day PANIFD came to existence, Islamists kept fighting against it because they consider it as a Plan that violates Shari'a and excludes the Islamic vision which is an essential component of Moroccan culture. Thus, what was the alternative Islamists opted for?

2.4 The Family Code

Based on the preceding discourse, Islamists chose the Code of Personal Status as an alternative approach. Under this Code (2004), a woman is considered a minor and placed under the guardianship of her father, husband, or another male guardian. Additionally, she is required to obtain permission and the signature of her "Wali" or matrimonial guardian, in order to marry. Furthermore, the Code permits women to marry at the age of 15, while men can marry at 18. If a woman undergoes divorce, she is denied custody of her children without any judicial justification. Whenever the husband wanted to divorce his wife for whatever reason and to have another one, he was permitted to do so. That is, "if the man [was] no longer satisfied with this relationship, […] he [could] end the contract by unilaterally repudiating his wife" (Buskens, 2003 [9], p.76). Also, the husband was considered as the head of the family, to whom the wife owed obedience in return for maintenance. That is to say, the code legalized "the husband to provide support, including food, clothing, medical care, and housing, whereas the wife provides fidelity and obedience" (Friedl & Afkhami, 1997, p. 76). In this context, Buskens (2003) [9] foregrounds that the Moroccan legislator:

Firmly maintained the patriarchal family model of classical Islamic jurisprudence. The code begins with a declaration of male supremacy. The opening article offers a modernist definition of marriage as an institution whose purpose is to found a family and promote harmony and mutual affection. However, this union takes shape tahtari'ayat al-zawj, 'under the care the husband. (pp. 75-76).

The Code required amendments as it failed to acknowledge Moroccan women as human beings entitled to live with dignity, just like men. Consequently, feminist organizations, political parties, NGOs, sociologists, journalists, and academics opposed and rejected the Code, leading to numerous protests denouncing its provisions. Indeed, the code had gone through many modifications, and many concepts such as "democracy, development, human rights, civil society and Ijtihad" (Buskens, 2003 [9], p. 70) began to fall within the debates which took place in this context.

In parallel with the protests, many articles and books were published to decry the patriarchal Code and to call for its rectification and modernization. Academic scholars such as Fatima Mernissi started to investigate and research the status of women in the Quran and the Hadiths. Mernissi had inspired feminist organizations. The Islamic feminist discourse developed by Mernissi in 1987 (the year the original version of her The Veil and the Male Elite was first published) [1] was meant to advocate for reform from an Islamic paradigm. This kind of discourse proved handy later on for liberal feminist organizations especially after the resistance to the PANIFD. Within the same line of thought, Amina Wadud, according to Barazangi (1995) [6], assumes that there are some Hadiths that contradict what God says in the Quran about women. What God says had never and must never be compared to what someone says. Thus, the authenticity lies in what God says. Therefore, some of the Hadiths said about women were questioned by some scholars such as Fatima Mernissi. According to her, some misogynist Hadiths minimize women's abilities and position them in the periphery. She provides examples such as the often-cited Hadith in Bukhari: "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity" (Mernissi, 1991, p. 49). In many occasions Mernissi justifies the good way the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH)-whom all Muslims should follow-was treating his wives. The Prophet (PBUH) used to talk, discuss, and consult his wives on many social, economic, or political issues. Thus, in this context, Fatima Mernissi points out that Islam is innocent from the (mis)interpretations men provided. Other scholars such as Amina Wadud (1995) [6], Asma Barlas (2002) [5], Aslan Ednan, Hermansen, and Medeni (2013) [3], and Hassan Hanafi (2000) [22] have developed a feminist hermeneutics. In this regard, Aslan, Hermansen, and Medeni (2013) [3] explain that this hermeneutic of suspicion demonstrates that:

Those interpretations which pretend to be neutral (mere transposition of the Qur'anic message) are actually

conditioned by the previous ideology of its interpreters. Every interpreter enters the interpretive process with their own subjectivity and baggage, i.e. with previous understandings on the questions treated by the text, conceptions and prejudices. (p. 67).

Due to these (mis)interpretations and inequalities that directly contradict the principles of equality and dignity advocated by Islam, the Code of Personal Status merely formalized women's subordinate status and men's dominant position. It perpetuated significant inequalities between the two genders. In spite of "the requirement in CEDAW that men and women have 'the same rights and responsibilities during marriage and its dissolution', the old Muduwana retained numerous discriminatory characteristics" (Friedl & Afkhami, 1997, p. 75).

The issue of women's rights as human rights emerged as a prevailing topic in various domains, including society, politics, academia, and media. During that period, discussing women's rights alongside human rights gained prominence and was perceived as "the new intellectual fashion" (Buskens, 2003 [9], p.78). The late King Hassan II acknowledged women's organizations and met with their representatives at the royal palace (Buskens, 2003) [9]. Nevertheless, in his speech, he asserted that "he would not permit Islamic family law to be a subject of political struggle" (Buskens, 2003 [9], p. 79). For this, on 13 October 1992, he "created a commission of twenty learned men and one woman, a representative of the royal court, to prepare a draft for the revision of the Muduwana" (Buskens, 2003 [9], p.79). The revised draft introduces specific changes, such as allowing a woman who has reached the age of 20 and lost her father to marry independently without the intervention of a marriage guardian. Additionally, polygamy and repudiation are subject to the approval of a judge. The wife is now permitted to be present during her husband's repudiation in the presence of two witnesses and is entitled to custody of her child (Buskens, 2003) [9]. Nevertheless, feminists remained dissatisfied with these modifications and continued their struggle for a just law that ensures equal rights for both men and women without favouring one over the other. In March 1992, the Union "Action Féminine" gathered one million signatures in favour of a Mudawana reform, a move perceived as a significant challenge to the preservation of Islam in Morocco (Buskens, 2003) [9].

Upon King Mohammed VI's accession to the throne in August 1999, there arose high expectations regarding potential social, religious, political, and economic reforms. His speech emphasized his belief in equal rights between men and women and the full integration of women in various aspects of life. Subsequently, King Mohammed VI established a consultative commission comprised of three women and thirteen male Muslim scholars to discuss the code. Meanwhile, women's associations, NGOs, and other political parties continued to advocate for their demands. External pressures also bolstered the call for women's rights in a modern society, ensuring their comprehensive participation across various domains. Consequently, these factors, along with numerous events and women's persistent struggles, played a pivotal role in the adoption of the New Family Code in January 2004.

The code heralded numerous transformations in the lives of women and served as a catalyst for a more robust democratization process in the country. The New Family Code introduced changes like raising the minimum age of marriage for girls to eighteen, making the intervention of a marriage guardian optional, and almost completely abolishing polygamy, as a man could now marry only with the agreement of his first wife and the permission of a judge. Similarly, after the dissolution of marriage, the mother was granted custody until the child reached the age of fifteen. Additionally, other adjustments concerning property division and the marital home after divorce were also taken into account (Buskens, 2003) [9].

Some feminists consider the Family Code a great victory for women. In this context, the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) described Morocco "as the second most liberal of six countries in the MENA region in terms of its treatment of women, placing it behind only Tunisia" (Castillejo & Tilley, 2015 [10], p.35). The new code introduced a range of measures or reforms to improve women's marriage-related status which include the following:

- For marriage contract, the presence of the *Wali* or the marriage guardian is no more mandatory. It is for the woman to choose if she wants to be represented by a *Wali* or not.
- The legal age of marriage for boys and girls is set at eighteen.
- The father is no more the head of the family. Instead, the family is placed under the joint responsibility of the spouses. Article 4 points out that "marriage is an act based on mutual consent to establish a lawful and lasting union between a man and a woman. Its goal in life is reciprocal fidelity, purity and the founding of a stable family under the management of both spouses". (Larsen, Vogt, Moe, Mir-Hosseini, 2013, p. 84)
- Polygamy has become very difficult and sometimes impossible. It is for the wife to permit her husband to take on another wife. The woman is also permitted "to stipulate in the marriage contract that her husband may not take another wife and that his failure to abide by his stipulation entitles her to a divorce" (Friedl & Afkhami, 1997, p. 76).
- The woman can no longer be divorced without a valid reason. The husband has to address a detailed request to the judge.
- Children born to a Moroccan mother can now become Moroccan citizens.
- The children of daughters, like those of sons, can get inheritance from their grandfather.

As a result of extensive efforts, prolonged debates, advocacy, and the backing of civil society organizations, NGOs, academics, and journalists, women today experience more rights and freedom than ever before.

In this context, Souad Eddouada and Zakia Salime are among the scholars who have clearly explored the political motives behind the reform and the idea of the development of Islamic state feminism. Souad Eddouada (2016) [15] claims that the 2004 Code is part of the national agenda for the promotion of a "Modern Moroccan and moderate Islam" that was officially set up in the aftermath of the 2003 Casablanca attacks" (p. 69). Zakia Salime (2007) [34] also confirms that "it was, in fact, through the reform of family law that the Moroccan monarchy truly recovered its image as a moderate regime, the Casablanca attack notwithstanding" (p. 5). Moreover, the code assumed a crucial political role in pacifying the discontent of Islamists who had been protesting against the reform for nearly two decades. Consequently, these revisions in the family code addressed the strategies employed by both feminist and Islamist women's groups to reassert gender

issues as central in the context of the war on terrorism (Salime, 2007) [34]. This implies that the code also played a part in the country's fight against terrorism, which posed a significant threat at that time.

Moreover, The New Family code has brought partnership, reciprocal respect, equal rights and responsibility-sharing between the spouses (article 51/4) (Robinson & Richardson, 1993). It has persuaded women to adopt a more progressive and liberal view of the role they need to play inside the family (Castillejo & Tilley, 2015 [10], p. 35). In this way, the victory of women's rights movement "seemed to demonstrate the validity of the assumption that democratization could be achieved through civil society activism, as it had struggled for decades to achieve a comprehensive reform of the family code" (Cavatorta, 2009 [11], p. 490).

However, despite these changes, a group of women were not satisfied, arguing that the Family Code "has been top-down, driven by an elite agenda, and not connected to any broader social change" (Castillejo & Tilley, 2015 [10], p. 35). Furthermore, they contend that numerous matters necessitate further examination, including domestic violence, the challenges faced by single mothers, the issue of child marriage, domestic labour, arranged marriages, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and inheritance. These phenomena continue to persist in Moroccan daily life despite the reforms implemented, often being overlooked in discussions concerning women's equal rights. The most concerning aspect is that Moroccan rural women find themselves somewhat disconnected from the progress made in enhancing the situation of women, mainly due to contextual and cultural barriers that constrain and hinder their lives. Peruccio (2016) [31] writes that "twenty-percent of rural women had never heard of it ("Data Tools" 2010)" (p. 11). Thus, feminist NGOs are still struggling today to gain more rights and to boost women's situation in Morocco. Indeed, the legal and social implementation of the Family code is not satisfactory and complete, and thus is still a farfetched and long-lasting project (Elliott, 2009).

Conclusion

This article aimed to sketch out the debates, and the sort of disputations governments, feminists, political parties, feminist organizations, NGOs, academic scholars, and journalists alike had gone through to guarantee the rights women enjoy today. Many strictures, however, were made against the persistent inequalities between men and women and between women themselves. The section also aimed to show that women's struggle to get more rights despite the obstacles they face and the threats they receive is indeed a long-term project and a work in progress. In such a way, it attempted to bring the programs, action plans, and reforms adopted in Morocco to ensure women's empowerment. Some reforms have failed to be officialised due to traditional and cultural norms, and others have roughly contributed to improving many aspects of women's everyday lives despite the many legal regulations and structural barriers that steadfastly stand against putting men and women on an equal footing. The following segment seeks to review the strategies suggested by the Moroccan government to empower women in rural areas.

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