Gender Matters: Women as Actors of Change and Sustainable Development in Morocco

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In comparison to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the Moroccan government has implemented a considerable number of reforms to improve women’s rights, including a gender quota for parliamentary elections, a revision of the Family Code (the Mudawana), a reform of the constitution, a law allowing women to pass nationality to their children, an amendment of the rape law, and a law criminalizing gender-based violence. Despite these reforms, women’s rights and gender equality have not improved; most of the changes exist on paper, and the legal measures have not been implemented well.

**HISTORY OF MOROCCAN WOMEN’S INVOLVEMENT IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Moroccan women have been integral to the country’s development through their role in its independence movement, its democratization, and in various social justice movements. Unfortunately, women were not heavily involved in nation-building post-independence, and the 1962 Mudawana further codified patriarchy into law. It legalized polygamy, established the marriage age at 15 for women and 18 for men, and institutionalized tutelage—or guardianship—in marriage.

The U.N. Decade for Women and the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women helped encourage the Moroccan feminist movement, leading to the launch of feminist journals including Lamalif and Thamanya Mars in 1983. In the 1990s, women mobilized around the issue of reforming the Mudawana. In 1992, a petition was signed by one million Moroccans, and in 1999, large demonstrations were held in Rabat and Casablanca. The reforms to the Mudawana were officially adopted in 2004.

The 20 February Movement, associated with the regional uprisings known as the “Arab Spring,” began with the twenty-year-old anonymous journalist student, Amina Boughalbi. Her message—“I am Moroccan and I will march on the 20th of February because I want freedom and equality for all Moroccans”—mobilized several thousand, mainly young, Moroccan men and women. Most of the people who reacted to the call were not active feminists and had no affiliation with any feminist organization. Nonetheless, women were present at all levels of this movement; they experienced police cruelty and represented the movement nationally and internationally. The activists believed that women’s rights would be better realized by working together with men towards mutual goals, rather than isolating women’s issues specifically. Thus, the slogans of the movement and its demands were largely gender neutral. The movement was therefore perceived as a new form of feminism, wherein both men and women were fighting for the same claims.
MOVEMENT DEMOGRAPHICS: AN URBAN/RURAL DIVIDE

The majority of women involved in the 20 February Movement, as well as most of the participants in previous women’s movements, were educated and thus unrepresentative of the country’s demographics. The national female illiteracy rate in Morocco is about 44%; 35% among urban women and 61% among rural women. Further, 22% of rural women do not receive any formal education. The economic inequality gap is therefore very wide among women in Morocco. The unemployment rate among women and their lack of access to services in rural areas hinders their potential to join the labor force or to change their situations. The eradication of illiteracy is thus necessary to improve gender equality and women’s rights.

Although the activists of the 20 February Movement were more educated than the average Moroccan woman, they did express concern about the inequality between elite and illiterate women. The movement also provided an opportunity for women to move into traditionally masculine public spaces. Since then, more women have publicly expressed that the interpretation of Islamic texts, culture, and traditions reduced their status, rather than Islam itself. Even illiterate women now utilize male-dominated spaces to denounce injustice and to ask for the rights adopted in the new Family Code and constitution.

Importantly though, rural women have not been absent from mobilization in Morocco, even if they have fewer resources with which to demand their rights. A rural grassroots movement began in 2007 by women known as the soulalyats, who were demanding rights to land ownership. The movement was sparked by a soulalyat woman from Kénitra whose male family members sold and profited off of her ancestral land. The soulalyat grassroots movement forced the government to give the women formal access to land. After a long struggle, a series of laws (62–17, 63–17 and 64–17) were promulgated for the management of collective lands, guaranteeing the soulalyats’ right to communal land. In fact, 128 hectares were distributed to 867 women, who have since maintained control over the land. The movement initiated a country-wide discussion about collective lands as national heritage, revealing the complexity of their management. The soulalyats prompted the government to ensure concrete solutions to this issue.

Another example of rural mobilization and the largest protest movement in Morocco since 2011 emerged in the same vein as the 20 February Movement. Known as the Hirak Rif or the Rif Movement, it took place in the Berber-speaking Rif region of northern Morocco between October 2016 and June 2017 as a result of the death of Mohcine Fikri. A woman named Nawal Ben Aisha played a key role in the protests after the arrest of Naser Zafzafi, the leader of the movement, and many mothers and wives of prisoners also participated. These women, the majority of whom are illiterate and Amazigh monolinguals, have become important actors of change.

Better access to technology and social media has allowed more women to participate across the socioeconomic spectrum as citizen journalists. Protesting has become a daily activity, with women documenting and sharing acts of injustice on social media. Women who were kept silent for decades denounce rape, sexual harassment, child abuse, and domestic violence on Facebook and YouTube. The Masaktach (“I won’t be silent”) Movement is a new and ambitious example of these protests, as it denounces rape on Facebook. Public spaces are also now available for mobilization; women demonstrate in front of hospitals, schools, public administration buildings, and parliament. Women have therefore become very visible in the public eye, taking initiatives to participate not only in movements that concern women’s rights, but also in issues that concern the general public. The historic and present-day mobilization of Moroccan women reveals that women can play a key role in the sustainable development of their country.
Despite these inspiring accomplishments, the implementation of new laws is very slow, with no subsequent review. For example, a closer look at the changes introduced in the new Family Code reveals a lack of enforcement. Child marriage has almost doubled in one decade, from 7% in 2004 to nearly 12% in 2013. Polygamy experienced a similar trend, although to a lesser degree: in 2010, nearly 43.41% of applications for polygamy were accepted. The implementation of the constitutional provision on gender equality has also been very slow. As Lamrabet argues, even though Article 19 of the Constitution gives equality to women, the practice of equality “does not and will not exist unless the hearts and minds of people are changed” and unless the politicians change. Indeed, there were no awareness campaigns surrounding the new Family Code, and the education system did not support it. The judges who passed the law hold the same patriarchal beliefs about women’s status, due to their interpretation of religious texts. Based on research conducted regarding gender issues in Morocco, cultural traditions and the misinterpretation of religious texts have contributed to women’s subordination. The patriarchal misinterpretation of Islam should therefore be reconsidered, with the inclusion of female Muslim scholars, in order for the new Family Code to positively impact women.

Despite the ratification of international conventions and the establishment of entities such as the Equality and Parity Commission, only 22% of women held positions of power in public administration in 2016, and 81 out of 395 deputies serving in parliament are currently women. Obviously, in practice, the situation has not drastically changed. The 2002 gender quotas were a crucial step towards the consolidation of democracy and a means with which to fight against the patriarchal elements of society; however, their impact on women’s status has been minimal, as the political parties are not adhering to the quota.

The empowerment of women as effective actors of sustainable development in Moroccan society would require more reforms and goals, including the following:

Reduce poverty among women by prioritizing literacy, guaranteeing education, and facilitating access to jobs. Literacy programs are a key step, particularly for women who are beyond schooling age, as 14.8% of girls aged 15 to 24 are illiterate, and about seven out of 10 rural women are illiterate, i.e., 67.4% compared to 36.2% for urban women and 37.2% for rural men. Education will also help reduce poverty, as a lack of education accounts for 36.8% of poverty among adults and 24% among children. Education is especially important for girls in rural areas, as one in 10 girls aged 7 to 12 in rural areas do not attend school.

Unemployment remains a major issue. According to figures from the Higher Planning Commission in Morocco, the employment rate for women was 22.2% overall and 70.4% for rural women. Almost 39.3% of employed women work without pay compared to only 9.5% of men. For rural women, this figure is closer to 70%. The national female employment rate declined from 26.8% in 2013 to 22.2% in 2019.

Promote and implement the Equality and Parity policy and encourage women’s access to decision-making positions. Only about 6% of Moroccan women hold decision-making positions.

Guarantee access to health services for women. Maternal health in rural areas is particularly important, as the rural maternal mortality rate remains twice as high as the urban rate. About 20.4% of pregnant women did not receive any antenatal consultations in rural areas in 2018, compared to 4.4% in urban areas.

Reform the Family Code of 2004. Female Muslim scholars should be included in the reinterpretation of the Quran and the revision of the Family Code. The new reform should be more focused and should clarify laws around early marriage and polygamy.
The inheritance law should also be revised, as more women are now sole providers for their families.

**Implement the gender budgeting policy.** Despite the state’s adoption of the gender approach in resource distribution within the budget, the situation has not changed significantly.

**Establish a culture of transparency** and a review of law implementation.

**Promote a culture of gender equality in schools.** Within school curriculum, stereotypes about women should be abolished, and the general representation of women should be reviewed.

**Promote a culture of gender equality through media awareness campaigns** such as the valorization of women’s success stories in advertisements. Awareness campaigns focusing on female equality should not be limited to International Women’s Day. Moroccans should be made aware of the value of empowering women to act as full members of society.

**ENDNOTES**

1. The term “Arab Spring” is rejected in the region because it does not include the other ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, namely the Amazigh people, Copts, and others.


3. Examples of movements where women took the lead include the Hirak Rif, the Soulalayat Movement, the “On the Road 96 Movement” (Imider), the Masaktach Movement, etc.


5. A 31-year-old fish seller, Mohcine Fikri was crushed to death in a rubbish bin on October 28, 2016 in Al Hoceima while trying to recover his confiscated merchandise.

6. A 36-year-old mother of four, Nawal Ben Aisha became the spokesperson for the protests, which were held every evening after the breaking of the Ramadan fast in Al Hoceima. She is now a political refugee in the Netherlands.

7. Droit & Justice, an organization promoting the rule of law in Morocco, found that of the 33,253 marriage contracts in 2009 and 35,152 in 2013, a total of 30,000 involved females under the age of 18.


10. I have supervised a number of doctoral theses on different gender issues—e.g., “Women’s Representation in the Moroccan Media,” “Gender Discourse after the Moudawana Reform,” “Women’s Representation in the Moroccan English Textbooks,” “Household Labour Division among Dual-Earner Couples,” “Women’s Political Participation,” and “Women’s Associations”—all of which have revealed that the status of women has not wholly improved.


12. Ibid.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE SERIES

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