



Moroccan Women in the new Socio-political Change

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Introduction

The last five decades witnessed a slow but evident change in the status of women in Morocco in different domains. At the socio-economic scale, changes demonstrate a number of improvements that have empowered women's situation, enabling them to engage and compete with men in the outside world, with self-autonomy and freedom to express their voices socially and politically. These changes include the socio-cultural life too that helped to reorganize the whole family structure and improve women's education and better their opportunities for paid employment in society.

First and foremost, the sector of women's access to education, which is a guaranteed key to employment, the other major achievement for their comfort and health betterment, is the control of fertility, and finally the political and decision making sphere that has undeniably empowered them with a decisive framework to make further claims. The main objective is, of course, to situate qualitatively the changes that have occurred in relation to gender equality/equity; considering that the roles invested socially by men and women are determined by different historical, socio-cultural and political factors.

Actually, from the 80s and under the influence of different women's organizations, the position of women in social and political life is marked with more force and vivacity. In this sense, the debate is crystalized vigorously around the project of the reform of the family code that began in the 2000s. It is indeed a hard task to question the changes that have occurred in women's life in Morocco, since these changes are multiple, complex and significant. To put on the fort some of these changes that have shaken the living conditions of Moroccan women, it is a priority to approach some major areas where women excelled the best.

The Royal Impulse

The royal will and the king's personal interest in promoting gender equality are, in fact, a key factor in achieving progress and building a modern and democratic society that has enabled the Moroccan woman to fully exercise her rights in all areas of civil, political, economic, social and cultural life. In this way, Women have taken important political and social steps, as they have emerged as a huge civic force pushing forward for democracy and fighting against injustice and various forms of discrimination.

Moreover, the entry into force of the Family Code, adopted in 2004 and considered one of the most progressive in the Arab world, is another essential element that gave the Moroccan woman a better social status, and gave a strong impetus to the process initiated by Morocco to promote and consolidate the concept of the "family" and the protection of minors. It is truly a great step forward for women's rights domestically and a model for the broader MENA region.

The family code brought about significant progress in many aspects of women's rights, and it enshrines the principle of equality between women and men at the level

of family responsibility, the rights and duties of both spouses and preserves the rights of the child by including the Code provisions in conformity with ratified international conventions by Morocco.

The current socio-demographic data is there to testify to the profound transformations that have significantly changed the economic, social, and political profile of Morocco. These changes confirm the need to ensure an equal place for men and women in the human and social development of the country.

First, we have to consider the urbanization of Morocco since the independence which is highly consolidating;.

hence, a strong migration to urban areas marks the mobility of the population. Additionally, the decline in the average age of little girls at marriage and the decline in the fertility rate are there to attest some considerable and significant social and cultural transformations in women's lives. The best presentation of the evolution of women is observed in the areas of education, reproductive health, employment, and politics. This representation does not only reflect the progress made in terms of changing perceptions of the role and status of women but also allows us to see the persistent gaps to overcome in terms of gender inequality.

Education a Key to Women's Emancipation

Schooling has always been perceived as a force for the development of any country; and access to women's education is basically recommended on the grounds that women are the educators of future generations. There is no doubt that women's education plays a vital role in promoting their role in society; it is also a key to gender equality and a safe way for their participation in decision-making: educated women are more politically active and knowledgeable about their legal rights and how to exercise them. Hence, improved literacy amongst women and girls is likely to contribute to higher levels of agency. Furthermore, education gives them greater access to paid employment outside the home.

Simply going to school exposes girls to new ideas, in addition, schools are places for increased awareness and broader influences, which can also lead to girls being more confident and empowered; ultimately giving them greater political voice. On the whole, education is an important springboard for not only the categorization of the public space and its diversity but also the personal investment and the possibility of building a future outside the socially attributed roles. Indeed, women's education is of paramount importance, for it enables them to meet the new challenges, and help them safeguard their rights and interests.

In the same context, feminists and women's organizations in Morocco, as in the rest of the world as a matter of fact, have early understood that their way out—for autonomy, economic independence and self-realization—was education. As a case in point, schools in Morocco trained the first generations of girls, who had subsequently gained access to paid work, as well as public and political responsibilities. Now we have educated elite engaged and aware of the social and political role to play in society. Admittedly, considerable progress has been recorded from the part of women since the last five decades; nonetheless, the majority of the ten million illiterate people in our country are women, about (62%).

The gap is not only about gender inequalities but also spatial, since rural women suffer more from illiteracy than urban women. Among illiterate children aged 7 to 15, (27.4%) are boys and (40.6%) are girls. Thus, several women's associations for development have prioritized the fight for equal opportunities in access to education for women and children in their programs and action plans. These efforts attempt to reduce social and spatial gaps as well as gender disparities. The difference between girls and boys, urban and rural, reflect a long history of discrimination against rural children in general, and girls in particular.

This penalization of rural girls is accentuated as soon as one moves towards the higher levels of education, posing in an urgent and crucial way the question of the persistence of the retention of rural girls at the end of the fundamental cycle. It is unfortunately sad to see that in the 21st century many major constraints still persist and prevent girls from accessing school such as poverty, sexual harassment, geographical distance and accessibility of schools, adding to that the illiteracy of mothers, and early marriage of girls in these areas where approximately 80% of women are illiterate to some degree.

Access to Employment, a Rightful Space

The growth of female employment is undeniable. The number of working women increased in Morocco from less than 1 million in 1960 to 2.4 million in 2000; at the same time, the employment rate of women has risen faster than that of men, some even believe that the question of female employment would be "settled" in a near future. Paradoxically and despite this development, female unemployment rates are in all occupational categories, among both young and long-term unemployed, higher than men's. Let's not forget that the female employment rate remains lower than that of men.

Thus, women in Morocco represent 25.5% of the active population, but more than half of the unemployed.

This paradox growth in women's employment and, at the same time the increase in women's unemployment can be explained either by the very large number of women entering the labor market or the previous low rate of women's participation. Another probability may be attributed to the fact that these women are often denied full access to information or resources with which to empower their civic or political agendas.

Today, the paid work of women has almost become commonplace and is actually part of the feminine identity (girls, at school, prepare themselves for a job like boys).

These trends give women greater confidence and agency, and ultimately higher levels of political voice; even though women's work is not yet considered equal to that of men, because it is actually perceived as different: men and women do not occupy the same jobs, and they do not perform the same tasks in certain sectors due to many constructed considerations. To better illustrate this, let's take the case of the working class women who continue to face discrimination, poor working conditions, unequal access to training, lower pay and longer hours, which indicates limited negotiating power. Besides, they are particularly vulnerable to job loss and heavily concentrated in the textile sector, informal sector and agriculture.

In a nutshell, due to the nature of the jobs they perform and the fragility of the place they occupy, women are more affected by unemployment. It is equally because their place is still fragile in the opinion and the mentality that the mobilization is not stronger to tackle female unemployment. The female unemployment rate is both the consequence and the illustration of the places of men and women in employment, the different assessment of the work done by men and by women, as well as the unequal division of family responsibilities between men and women. In general, women's unemployment continues to affect young people between the ages of 25 and 34 particularly.

Fertility Control, the Released Body

Since the 1990s, the birth rate went down considerably from 7.7 in 1962 to 2.6 children per woman in urban areas, and from 6.9 to 4.3 in rural areas. This important change could be related to the sociological and demographic factors which mainly decrease the average age of marriage and the use of contraception. Like their male counterparts, Moroccan women nowadays marry more and more lately compared to some decades ago. This fact attests to a qualitative evolution of the social status of women in terms of improving their health and strengthening their human capital and liberating them for greater economic and political engagement.

Women are therefore less subject to the constraints of procreation (multiple pregnancies, education of children...). In fact, women's health and social outcomes have improved dramatically: the fertility rate is now one of the lowest in the region; the maternal mortality rate decreased by two-thirds in just two decades; definitely, the use of contraception can be considered as the most important moment that has led to material psychological liberation that promotes women's empowerment and capacity development.

In brief, it is necessary to emphasize that the symbolic value of fertility has changed. The social investment of the woman's body is no longer so oriented towards procreation and safeguarding the male honour. This control of fertility that empowered women had led them in a process of liberation and influenced their access to outdoors responsibilities, and making the most of opportunities offered to them in the public sphere. This ultimately gave them legitimate access to the outside world and gave them money that can increase their negotiating power and autonomy in the home.

Access to Decision-making Positions, Towards a Sharing of Power

The status of women has always been a “political” issue in the sense that it has been the subject of discussion and debate - of contestation - among different groups or “publics” (in Fraser’s terminology). Actually, women already have a high degree of decision-making power in their families, communities, businesses and societies. Every day they show their determination to work, ameliorate and reduce political and social tensions. Presumably, women’s political participation is a question of central concern to democracy.

Certainly, a sustainable society, and a thriving democracy depends on all of its citizens being included and involved in public debate and decision-making at every level. It is also a question that is of central concern to gender equality, justice and human rights.

Currently, we can testify that the Moroccan woman has already taken important political and social steps, and the realization of these precious assets in her favor is the result of the enlightened policy of the king Mohamed VI who has never ceased to work for the promotion of the role and place of the Moroccan woman in all the various fields of public life.

Certainly, the principle of equality is enshrined in the 2011 Constitution that asserts women's equal rights and prohibits all forms of discrimination, notably gender discrimination. It also guaranteed the political rights and the exercise of public freedoms. Despite all these achievements, the reality is deceptively not always compatible with the declarations of principle; for the representation of women at the level of public authorities and decision-making at the national, local and regional levels remains so far very low. For the feminization of the civil service and the increase in the number of female officials do not mean the existence of equity and equal

opportunities in access to big responsibilities and important functions, and as a matter of fact, a majority of women officials find themselves in average status. However, the public administration is opening up since a few years now to a minority group of women who are starting to occupy some high ministerial responsibilities. Indeed, a visible advent for women in parliament is worth to be noted, from 1% in 2003 to 17% today. Progression is slow but important in the face of long years of the exclusion of women in the field of responsibility and decision making.

As for the political field, it has remained particularly closed to women for decades, and women wielding political power are still a rarity in Morocco. The formal presence of women at the level of Legislative and executive institutions have been slowly growing, while women have played an important role at different levels of public life and have participated actively in political affairs. As for municipal councils, representativeness of women in prefectures, provinces and regions remains derisory. Regardless of the advanced constitutional provisions, this clear discrimination is probably due to the Moroccan political parties that display a certain laxity and reservations with regard to women's political

participation, since, despite the slogans they carry in their speeches, they give women neither the opportunity nor the necessary conditions to access to Parliament; many women did not have the privilege of being at the head of the lists of electors and in the assemblies elected, whether at the local, provincial or regional level. Because of some persisting gender stereotypes, women are frequently perceived as lacking the ‘natural’ competence needed to succeed in politics. To implement the cliché, men’s discursive strategies is to uphold the attitude that “politics” is exclusively limited to the formal political sphere (political institutions and parties)

largely dominated by men. Indeed, men are reluctant to be led by a woman; even women are reluctant to vote for female candidates. To change this archaic mentality, or rather to destabilize the old patriarchal structures, and thanks to the introduction of legal reforms on women's political participation, their presence as MPs is mostly requested/needed to help change the perception that women are not suited to politics, in the same way, to foster their acceptance in decision-making positions and redefine the whole social and political gender identities. The advocacy of women's associations is focused on the meaning of women's empowerment with a view to the

representativeness at the political level and a better redistribution of responsibilities in decision-making centres, the aim is to establish measures of "positive discrimination" or voluntarist with a view to reducing the differences between men and women to optimize the conditions for equal opportunities. Following the advocacy and mobilizations of women's movement, the political parties decided to reserve the national list for women's candidacy, allowing, thus, the access of 35 women to the Parliament (30 elected on the basis of the national list and 5 based on regional lists). In this way, Morocco is today among the Arab countries that have the highest representation of women in Parliament (10%).

Conclusion

Over the past decades, Morocco has made the integration of women, especially the improvement of their social conditions and their participation in the economic, and the socio-political circuits a strategic priority. Positively, women have gained an improved education, smaller families, better health and greater access to paid employment outside the home. Many factors have empowered women, making it more possible for them to claim their rights by engaging in political processes and social movements.

For further improvements, the government has initiated

significant changes and established the rule of law through various projects (development of civil society, ratification of international conventions by the Government, promulgation of the new Family Code, etc....).

As mentioned above, all these changes could not have been achieved without significantly affecting justice and gender relations. It is no coincidence that the struggle of women for equality and equity naturally took place in the movements and took the advantage of the context to affirm the necessity of the issue and place it at the center of the construction of democracy and a modern state.



**Thank you for your
attention**

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