



Forging Pathways for Women in Morocco: The Status of Women and the Grassroots Activism of the Association du Forum des Femmes Au Rif (Part I)

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Morocco is a nation of rich complexity, serving as a crossroads of Arab, Amazigh (Berber), African, and European cultures. Its geography is as diverse as its heritage, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea and rising into the Atlas and Rif mountains. With a population of nearly 37 million, the country is predominantly urban, however, a significant portion of its people still reside in rural areas where life



follows a different rhythm. While Arabic is the official language and Islam the state religion, the indigenous Amazigh language, spoken by a substantial portion of the population, particularly in rural regions, was officially recognized in the 2011 constitution, affirming the nation's pluralistic roots[1].

In this landscape, the story of Moroccan women is one of profound change and persistent challenges. Over the past several decades, Morocco has made significant strides, enacting progressive legal reforms and championing development, by fulfilling its international commitments following the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol. However, this ratification was accompanied by reservations that limit its scope. Yet, Morocco continues to grapple with one of the most significant gender gaps in economic participation worldwide. The country ranked 137th out of 148 in the Global Gender Gap Index 2025 by the World Economic Forum[2]. The reality on the ground, particularly for women in rural regions, often tells a different story where tradition, social norms, and economic barriers continue to shape destinies, and marginalization, worsened in recent years by drought, as well as the lack of basic infrastructure and stable employment opportunities.

This article explores this journey, from the national policies designed to recognize women's rights and contributions, to the vital, on-the-ground work of grassroots organizations that are turning legal promises into lived realities. Focusing on the unique context of the agricultural sector and the inspiring work of the Association du Forum des Femmes Au Rif (AFFA Rif), we will examine how local initiatives are creating new opportunities to safeguard and advance the human rights of women in Morocco.

Status of Women in Morocco

Drawing from the historical narratives of women in Morocco, spanning from centuries past to present, it is evident that the status of Moroccan women is not static; rather, it is subject to continual change influenced by the prevailing conditions they navigate and live in. The contemporary status of women in Morocco is the product of a long and complex history. It is a story of negotiation between deep-rooted traditions, the disruptive force of colonialism, and the persistent struggle for a transformative change. Understanding this evolution is essential to grasping the context in which organizations like the Association du Forum des Femmes Au Rif (AFFA Rif) operate and the nature of the challenges they confront.

Pre-Colonial Legacy: The Agency of Amazigh Women

Contrary to modern stereotypes that often portray women in the region as historically confined to the private sphere, pre-colonial Moroccan society, particularly its Amazigh



(Berber) communities, reveals a different narrative. Many of these societies were organized along matrilineal lines, a structure that afforded women significant influence and agency in both economic and cultural domains[3]. Women were not peripheral figures but central actors in the rural economy, deeply involved in agriculture and pastoralism.

Beyond their economic contributions, Amazigh women were the primary custodians of cultural heritage. They were the weavers, storytellers, and poets who preserved and transmitted the community's identity, traditions, and oral literature from one generation to the next. The art of rug-weaving, for instance, was more than a craft; it was a symbolic language through which women expressed their worldview, spirituality, and tribal identity, while also providing a crucial source of household income[3]. This historical legacy of female agency and cultural authority provides a vital, though often overlooked, backdrop to the modern struggle for women's rights.



The city of Tetouan, located in the Rif Mountains in Northern Morocco, at the cross road of Europe and Africa. Source: IAPC.

Colonial and Post-Independence Patriarchy

The French and Spanish colonial periods (1912-1956) introduced profound disruptions. European colonial narratives often imposed an Orientalist lens, portraying Moroccan women as uniformly oppressed, docile, and in need of “saving” by the civilizing mission of the colonizer. This perspective ignored the complex realities of women's lives and



their existing forms of agency. Simultaneously, colonial policies and economic changes began to erode traditional social structures, often reinforcing patriarchal norms in new ways.

One example is the European-style coffee shops that proliferated in Morocco's big cities during the French and Spanish protectorates in the early 20th century[4]. These establishments quickly became integral to the social fabric of Moroccan cities, yet they were predominantly the domain of men. They were spaces for men to socialize, conduct business, and engage in political discourse. For Moroccan women, attempting to enter a café was often considered a cultural taboo. The gendered division of space was a cornerstone of the social order, and the coffee shop was a clear manifestation of this divide[5]. The colonial process, despite its claims to "introduce civilization", often reinforced and even intensified existing patriarchal systems and gender segregation.

Following independence in 1956, the first Moroccan Family Code, or Moudawana, was enacted in 1958. Drafted by male religious scholars, this legal code codified a highly patriarchal vision of society, drawing heavily on a conservative interpretation of Islamic law[6]. The 1958 Moudawana legally subordinated women to men, cementing their status as legal minors for much of their lives. A woman could not marry without the permission of a male guardian (wali), her right to work or travel could be vetoed by her husband, and she had severely restricted rights to initiate divorce. Meanwhile, the law permitted polygamy without constraint and established the husband as the sole head of the household[7]. This code effectively enshrined gender inequality in the legal fabric of the newly independent nation.

Moroccan Women Today: Standing at an intersection of progress and traditions

Today, Moroccan women stand at a complex intersection of progress and tradition. Significant legal advancements, first the 2004 reform of the Family Code (the Moudawana), a result of decades of feminist activism that has granted women greater rights in marriage, divorce, and child custody. This landmark reform raised the minimum age of marriage to 18, established joint responsibility of spouses for the family, and gave women the right to file for divorce[8]. And later, the 2011 Constitution, that recognized gender equality as a fundamental principle.



A coffee shop in Fes, Morocco. Nowadays there're many coffee shops in the country, and it's quite common to see women sitting inside or on the terrace, especially in the big cities like Casablanca and Rabat. However, until the end of the last century, it was rare to see women showing up in these public areas, which are traditionally considered as a "space for men". Source: IAPC.

However, the gap between law and daily life remains wide, especially in rural areas. Key statistics paint a clear picture of the disparities in various sectors.

In education and literacy, the recorded statistics nationally indicates that the rate of illiteracy among women is almost double that of men, standing at 32.5% compared to 17.3%. This gap widens dramatically in the countryside. While the urban illiteracy rate is 17.4%, it soars to 38.1% in rural areas, where cultural and economic barriers to female education are more present, and the geographic and infrastructural challenges even surpass the cultural and economic ones: only 54.6% of rural households are connected to a public running water network, and only 70.3% of them have primary means of wastewater disposal, meaning septic tanks and soakaways[1]. As much as primary education is nearly universal for girls, there is a significant gap when it comes to secondary education. In the 15-17 age group, the school enrollment rate for urban girls is a high 96.3%, but it drops to 50.8% for their rural counterparts[9].

This occurs because of cultural norms that devalue their education in favor of boys, who are expected to be financial providers. Furthermore, girls are often burdened with



domestic and agricultural labor, including the vital task of fetching water. The persistence of early marriage and the desire for their participation in the rural labor force also contribute to girls leaving school[17]. Moreover, even if the parents recognize the importance of education for girls, in many of the cases they decide to keep the girls at home because of the long distance to schools, unsafe conditions, lack of proper sanitation facilities, etc[10].

Equally for economic participation of women in Morocco, the divide is even more stark. The labor force participation rate for women stands at just 19.0%, a fraction of the 69.0% rate for men. This gap persists across both urban (18.5% for women) and rural (19.9% for women) areas[1]. A considerable amount of studies have revealed that the issue is not a deficit of qualified women, but a surplus of constraints that limit their opportunities and the persistence of gender stereotypes in society, which confine women to the private sphere and allow men to dominate the public sphere, as well as persistent discrimination in the labor market[11].

Compounding these challenges is the immense responsibility of unpaid domestic and care work. Moroccan women spend an average of five hours per day on these tasks, nearly seven times more than the 43 minutes spent by men[9]. This “double burden” severely limits their ability to seek or maintain formal employment.

While top-down legal reforms like the Moudawana are crucial, it is clear that amending the law is not enough if economic, social, and cultural conditions are not changed to ensure that women can actually benefit from the partial gains that have been achieved. The stipulation of equal pay for men and women has not put an end to the glaring disparities in this regard. Setting the minimum age for employment at 15 has not protected tens of thousands of girls from domestic servitude. The most recent national HCP survey on violence against women, conducted in 2019, found that 57.1% of women aged 15 to 74 had experienced violence in the 12 months prior to the survey. This represents an urgent and vast human rights crisis[18].

Twenty years after the 2004 reform, a new revision of the Code is underway, driven by civil society, which laments the disparities in the application of the law. However, the proposals presented by the Minister of Justice in late December 2024 sparked disappointment and criticism from women’s and human rights associations, particularly regarding agnatic inheritance that favors male relatives, exceptions for underage marriage, and the failure to protect single mothers or fully recognize DNA evidence for paternity. This illustrates the urgent need for legal reforms, an effective and responsive judicial system, and concerted efforts to change the patriarchal social norms, and it is in this gap between policy and practice that the work of community-level organizations becomes essential[19].



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