



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

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The Invisible Hands: Women in Agriculture

Agriculture is a cornerstone of the Moroccan economy, with more than 50% (UN, 2023) of all working women finding their livelihood in this sector. [9] Moroccan women play an indispensable and multifaceted role in the agricultural sector: they are smallholder



farmers, “family helpers”, and precarious wage-earning agricultural workers.

Women smallholder farmers are those female farmers who have access to land, or those who work in the land of their family, usually owned by men, and thus also known as “family helpers”. They are involved in a wide range of processes, including harvesting, sowing, weeding, fertilization, irrigation, storing, and threshing. [13] Major crops and activities include the cultivation of cereals, citrus, fruits, vegetables, and olive trees.

Beyond the farm, women perform the vast majority of food processing work, such as grinding grains, preserving fruits and vegetables, and smoking fish and meats, which is vital for food security. Women are also recognized as preservers of biodiversity and traditional knowledge of indigenous plants used for nutrition and health. Amazigh women, in particular, are crucial for preserving local food security and cultural heritage by transmitting knowledge, selecting seeds, and employing traditional methods for food conservation and transformation.



Women decladding argan in the Cooperative Feminine Toudarte. Women are traditionally the backbone of the argan industry. **Source: IAPC.**

However, while in rural areas women’s activity is largely concentrated in agriculture



(93.6% of female rural employment is in agriculture), a significant portion of this labor goes unpaid. Historically, figures have shown that a high percentage of actively employed rural women were family helpers, and over 70% of them received no compensation for their work (a 2017 figure). As far back as 2005, over 68% of rural female labor was unpaid, and this invisibility persists.

The lack of recognition for this labor means a substantial portion of economic activity, vital for the agricultural sector and rural livelihoods, is invisible in national accounts. The HCP has estimated that the full inclusion of rural women could generate a significant economic gain for the country.

A larger group of women employed in the agricultural sector are the female “**agricultural workers**”: workers who work for wages on farms they do not own. They are subjected to both legal and gender-based discrimination, which manifests in wage inequality and hazardous working environments that present both physical and social barriers. [13]

Most female agricultural laborers work without contracts or social protections. They also endure significantly worse conditions than the employed females in the industry sector, where health and safety standards are critically lacking. It’s common to see women laborers working for long hours under the hot sun, exposed to dust and chemical fertilizers without adequate protection like masks, gloves, and hats, and the daily payment varies from 60 to 100 Dirhams (about 6 to 10 euros). At the same time, this grueling labor is compounded by a pervasive social stigma. Female agricultural workers are often targets of gossip and derogatory labels within their communities, which question their morality for working in public spaces alongside men because of the traditional gendered space division. [14]

To understand the wide range of challenges faced by Moroccan women in agriculture, we need to dive deeper into the key constraints they are surrounded by: limited control of arable land and water, the most critical resources in agriculture.

Barriers to Arable Land and Water

Traditional land inheritance laws often favor male relatives, meaning women rarely own the land they cultivate. Most of the smallholder women farmers (female with access to land) work on an area of less than 5 hectares and are extremely vulnerable to climate change and land degradation. [9] Across the North Africa region, women represent less than 5% of all agricultural landholders. [12] Without land as collateral, women are effectively barred from accessing formal credit, preventing them from investing in their farms, purchasing better equipment, or launching their own enterprises. This lack of ownership is compounded by limited access to other critical resources, such as technical



training, agricultural extension services, and new technologies, which have historically been designed for and delivered to men. [15]

Furthermore, it excludes them from decision-making bodies. In Morocco, water for irrigation is often managed by Water Users' Associations (WUAs). Because membership is typically tied to land ownership, women are effectively barred from participating. This means they have no say in how water is distributed or managed, even though they bear the responsibility for household water collection and are intimately involved in irrigation work, reinforcing their role as unqualified laborers rather than empowered farmers. [13]

And it's not just about fair water access. Studies have shown that, with women often being the primary users of water for domestic purposes and small-scale agriculture, their input in decision-making processes can lead to more practical and efficient water allocation and use, ensuring that the needs of the entire community are met. [23]

Struggles for Autonomy: Promises and Setbacks

Facing systemic exclusion, Moroccan women in agriculture have mobilized to claim their land rights and autonomy through organized civil activism and the creation of economic cooperatives, though both approaches present their own challenges.

One of the most vivid examples of civil activism is the Soulaliyate movement, which emerged in the early 2000s after tribal women were excluded from inheriting or profiting from privatized collective lands traditionally reserved for men. Demanding equal rights to land ownership and compensation from sales, their activism relies on public protests and legal challenges. This approach has yielded significant victories, such as a 2013 court ruling that redistributed 128 hectares of land to 867 women. However, their success is often curtailed by a combination of deep-seated patriarchal resistance, intimidation by authorities, and powerful corporate interests that block the full implementation of their legal wins. [20]

Alongside direct activism, the formation of women's agricultural cooperatives has been another key strategy for promoting economic independence. Spurred by national programs like the National Human Development Initiative (INDH) since 2005, this movement has fostered impressive growth, with women now representing 29% of all cooperative members in Morocco. [21] Yet, these organizations face a paradoxical threat where success invites exploitation. The booming international market for local products, such as argan oil, has shifted control of the trade to intermediaries and large corporations. As a result, many women have lost direct control over their resources, their role reduced from that of autonomous owners to a mere labor force working for meager daily wages without social security benefits. [22]



A Space for Change: The Association du Forum des Femmes au Rif (AFFA Rif)

Like many grassroots organizations that have emerged in response to these deep-seated challenges, the Association du Forum des Femmes au Rif (Association of the Women's Forum in the Rif, also known as "AFFA Rif") provides a compelling example of how local, culturally attuned activism can empower women from the ground up.

AFFA Rif was founded in 1998 in the northern town of Al Hoceima by Zohra Koubia, the daughter of a peasant farmer who, against the local norm, believed in educating girls. The social climate at the time was profoundly restrictive, and the founding of AFFA Rif was a radical act. At a time when social progress had already happened, while women's presence in a coffee shop was seen as "abnormal" in rural areas, Zohra Koubia founded AFFA Rif to be a safe, dedicated space where women could gather, speak freely, share their struggles, and begin to organize for change. This simple act of claiming space was the first step in a long journey of empowerment. Twenty-seven years later, the women of AFFA Rif now host their own cultural salons, a testament to the profound shift they have helped create.

AFFA Rif's strategy is remarkable for its holistic and integrated approach, recognizing that a woman's empowerment cannot be achieved by addressing a single issue in isolation. The organization's programs are designed to tackle economic, educational, social, cultural, and environmental challenges at the same time.

The work began by addressing fundamental needs: providing maternity services, promoting women's health, and running literacy courses. From this foundation, AFFA Rif expanded into economic empowerment. In 2005, it established its first women's cooperative, and today it supports 24 women-led cooperatives of local agricultural products like almonds, figs, and peppers. These cooperatives are built upon the traditional knowledge that the women members already possess, such as agriculture, food processing, and craftsmanship. They are structured collectively under the guidance of AFFA Rif, which provides essential training, technical support, and organizational strengthening.



Theoretical training for cooperative members. Source: AFFA Rif.



Field practices. Source: AFFA Rif.

In 2014, AFFA Rif integrated agroecology into its programs, teaching sustainable farming practices and promoting the recovery of local seeds. This initiative is more than just agriculture; it is an act of cultural reclamation. By reviving traditional farming methods and preserving local biodiversity, AFFA Rif helps farmers reduce their dependence on expensive foreign seeds, strengthening both food sovereignty and Amazigh cultural identity.

Recognizing the need to shift mindsets, AFFA Rif also uses theater in village schools to celebrate the value of farm women and local foods, inspiring respect for women's contributions in the next generation. These local efforts are amplified through



international partnerships, such as the "Âme du Rif" (Soul of the Rif) ethical fashion project with the Spanish foundation CIDEAL, which involves 120 women creating traditional garments from natural fibers.

Bridging Divides: Successes and Enduring Challenges

The warmth and effectiveness of AFFA Rif's work lie in its culturally sensitive methods. By conducting literacy classes in the local Amazigh language, the association makes its programs accessible and validates a cultural heritage that has been historically marginalized. In more conservative villages, AFFA Rif adapts by holding separate classes for women and men, a practical approach that allows women to participate freely without directly confronting entrenched customs.

The successes are tangible. The 24 women-led cooperatives are a clear sign of economic progress. Cooperatives like Louz Sidi Boutmim (almonds) and Kenz Igna Ouano (figs) improve the quality and increase the value of the women's products, provide them with direct access to resources and income, and help them integrate successfully into both the public sphere and the formal economy. Furthermore, this effort fosters the development of local female leadership and achieves broader social recognition of the vital role women play in agricultural and artisanal production. The cooperatives also actively contribute to the preservation and promotion of the region's local heritage, both tangible and intangible.

All these achievements lead to a transformative result: empowered within the framework of a social and solidarity-based economy founded on the principles of equity, sustainability, and social justice, women move from a position of invisibility and dependence to a central role in the local economy and community life.

More than agriculture, the journey from being barred from coffee shops to hosting their own cultural salons marks a profound change in women's public presence and agency. These salons, organized in the douars (rural villages), follow a community-based education model that seeks to give voice to women, creating spaces not only for exchange and debate but also for artistic creation.

They are hubs of vibrant creativity, where local theater and song flourish, often in the Amazigh language. These gatherings are also an opportunity for women to collectively create theatrical works inspired by their daily lives. By addressing issues that affect them directly, they make their voices heard in the public sphere. Local festivities, like the Amazigh New Year (January 13), and international days, such as March 8 or October 15 International Day of Rural Women, are celebrated with great enthusiasm and commitment.



Celebrating the Amazigh New Year. Source: AFFA Rif.

Meanwhile, AFFA Rif keeps its women's café alive, a unique space that functions as a cultural café open to all: women, students, and young people from the region. This meeting place fosters intergenerational exchange and access to culture, strengthening the community movement driven by women in the area.

However, AFFA Rif's work also highlights the limits of grassroots action in the face of systemic barriers. The cooperatives struggle with market access, often limited to local fairs due to poor infrastructure. Social pressures persist, with some women forced by their families to leave the cooperatives. And the long-term vision of agroecology can clash with the immediate economic needs of farmers who may prioritize quick returns. These challenges underscore a critical point: while grassroots organizations can empower individuals, these newly empowered women then face structural barriers that only state-level policy and investment can resolve.

Conclusion: The Path Forward

The story of women in Morocco is one of inspiring progress set against a backdrop of persistent inequality. National policies and legal reforms like the Moudawana have created an essential framework for change, but their promise is often unfulfilled in the daily lives of women, particularly in rural communities.

The work of the Association du Forum des Femmes au Rif offers a powerful model for bridging this gap. Its success is built on a deep understanding of local culture, a holistic approach that weaves together economic, social, and cultural empowerment, and a



commitment to building sustainable, community-led structures. AFFA Rif demonstrates that true empowerment is a process of cultural reclamation, economic self-determination, and the creation of safe public spaces where women's voices can be heard.

The path forward requires a partnership between the state and civil society. The government can build the roads, create national market linkages, and reform judicial systems, but it is organizations like AFFA Rif that build the on-ramps for marginalized women to access these opportunities. True and inclusive development for Morocco will be achieved only when the "invisible hands" of its rural women are not only seen and valued but are also given the structural support they need to thrive.

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