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Morocco, Factor 15: Human Rights

## **Morocco: Empowering Rural Women to Improve Lives**

### **Introduction:**

Morocco is a cultural gem in North Africa that borders Algeria, Spain, Mauritania and the Atlantic Ocean. Moroccans have lives as diverse and unique as the landscape that surrounds them. For instance, there is an extremely wealthy upper class and a growing middle class but also citizens living in extreme poverty. I chose to research Morocco because my father is originally from there and I have visited the country several times. I am curious to know more about the effect of human rights and gender inequality on food security of Moroccan citizens.

Morocco has the one of the highest per capita incomes on the African continent<sup>1</sup>. Its proximity to Europe and status as a former French colony allows for a mutually beneficial and privileged relationship to exist with countries such as France, Spain and Italy. Although the standard of living in Morocco is twice as high as the average of the rest of Africa, problems still exist relating to human rights<sup>1</sup>. People in rural areas are disadvantaged and not everyone has equal access to education, nutritional food, or opportunities for upward mobility. Cultural norms and standards exacerbate these issues for women<sup>1</sup>.

### **Problems facing rural families:**

Rural residents of Morocco tend to have larger families and often marry at a younger age than their urban counterparts. The average size of a rural family is nine members. A rural woman's fertility rate is 3.0 children, which represents a dramatic decline from 6.6 births in 1980<sup>2</sup>. The large overall family size is due to older relatives living with the family. Rural areas have faced an urban exodus with more than 60% of the population living in urban areas in 2016 compared with less than 25% in 1971<sup>3</sup>. More than half of Moroccans in rural areas live in poverty<sup>1</sup>. Women-led households are at particular risk of living in poverty and facing food insecurity.

The agriculture is the primary source of income for 80% of rural residents<sup>1</sup>. Within a rural Moroccan family, roles are divided up by gender<sup>4</sup>. The father focuses on activities oriented on the market, like livestock production, and obtains credit and other financial necessities, while the mother tends to her household and farms using traditional agricultural practices. She also manages the natural resources available (i.e. wood for a fire, access to water)<sup>4</sup>. If the father leaves to find employment elsewhere, he will leave his wife in charge of the household. However, without ownership of land and/or other valuable assets, she cannot access credit, therefore becoming unable to sustain her family or maintain sustainable use of resources<sup>4</sup>.

Moroccan diets depend on location. Unlike urbanized areas of the country, where macronutrient rich and processed foods are abundant, diet in rural regions of Morocco consists mainly of locally produced cereals, some vegetables and fruits with limited amounts of meat and dairy<sup>5</sup>.

Obesity rates in adults have risen, particularly in urban areas but also in rural communities<sup>5</sup>. Traditional female beauty standards contribute to the prevalence of obesity in women, but under employment of women also plays a role<sup>1</sup>. However, undernutrition is still a problem in young children. Estimates in 2011 indicate that 15% of children under five were subject to slowed developmental growth due to chronic malnutrition during pregnancy and infancy<sup>5</sup>. Factors contributing to malnutrition in children include persistent drought and poverty in certain rural areas<sup>4</sup>.

Moroccan education varies largely depending on two factors: income and location. Children in rural areas tend to go to public schools, many of which are far from their homes. Rural schools are often ill equipped and students are not separated by age or grade. Some may face language barriers since students from predominantly Berber-speaking areas are unprepared for instruction in Arabic and French<sup>6</sup>. Transportation is also an issue in the fight for educational equality, primarily because of inadequate infrastructure, but also because of inconsistency and occasionally, weather. Rural schools have a high dropout rate compared to those in urban areas because secondary schools are located too far away for students to attend<sup>6</sup>. Other reasons include the need for income, meaning students drop out to work and/or support their family, and gender inequality. Girls from rural areas tend to drop out after primary school or during secondary school, and may end up married, despite the fact that the minimum age of the marriage is eighteen<sup>7</sup>. The dropout rate in rural areas from primary school is 22%<sup>8</sup>. Overall, 18% of young adults 15 to 24 are illiterate<sup>8</sup>. In addition, the rate of illiteracy for women in rural Morocco is nearly double that of men (54.7% and 30.8% respectively)<sup>9</sup>.

Similarly, access to medical care in Morocco varies depending on income and location. Rural communities do not have the same sort of access to healthcare that their urban counterparts do<sup>8</sup>. The number of doctors per 1000 people is smaller in rural areas. Morocco does not have many doctors to spare, primarily due to a low annual graduation rate and educated doctors seeking better employment elsewhere, especially in Europe<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, people who live in urban areas and have access to hospitals are often not able to receive the best care possible. Since 2013, Moroccan hospitals were unavailable to provide patients with adequate pain relief, medicine, blood and other medical necessities<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, hospital equipment tends not to work correctly, or is practically nonexistent. Despite the Moroccan government devoting more than five billion dollars on healthcare, corruption within hospitals is still booming (often in the form of bribes since doctors and nurses are not paid well)<sup>11</sup>. Maternal health care also varies according to location; rural women are 8.7% less likely to receive postnatal care than women in urban areas<sup>11</sup>.

### **Moroccan agriculture:**

Since the terrain is so diverse, Morocco is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. According to the *Human's Rights Council's report on the right to food in Morocco*, environmental resources and water are especially vulnerable, due to increased population growth, tourism, industrialization, and agricultural expansion. Starting in 2030 and beyond, Morocco is predicted to show signs of increased aridity due to reduced rainfall and high temperatures<sup>4</sup>. It is suggested that the country will stay somewhat stable for a short time, but an increase in aridity will most likely have negative effects on overall agriculture production and/or

yields. Another major environmental issue plaguing Morocco is that of erosion, which is caused by soil degradation, drought, poor land management, and desertification<sup>4</sup>.

The agricultural sector is vital to the country's economy, contributing about 14 percent to GDP in 2010<sup>1</sup>. However, only 15% of the terrain is suitable for production of crops or livestock<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, drought is a serious threat due to heavy reliance on rain-fed agriculture and irregular precipitation. Approximately 85% of agricultural land is without irrigation, therefore resulting in a higher exposure to drought and erratic precipitation and subsequent negative consequences on crop yields<sup>1</sup>. Morocco is a net importer of food. Although 65% of cultivated land is dedicated to cereal production, mostly wheat and barley, Morocco is a large importer of cereals<sup>1</sup>. To increase production, cultivation of cereals has moved toward marginal lands. As a result, food prices in the country are subject to volatility in weather, as well as price volatility in the world market<sup>1</sup>.

There is a dual nature to the agriculture sector in Morocco. The vast majority of farms are small, with 70% having less than five hectares<sup>1</sup>. Production on small farms tends to be more diversified, growing cereals and vegetables. Rural households that are landless or have very small acreages account for 40% of the rural population and own only 8% of cultivated land<sup>1</sup>. The mountainous terrain and poor soils mean that most land is not suited for large-scale production. The majority of arable land is held by the small percentage of Moroccan farms that are modernized and that account for a large portion of production<sup>12</sup>. There has been an employment shift in areas of the country favorable for intensified agriculture. According to the World Bank, in 2011, 61% and 32% of men and women, respectively, employed outside the home worked in agriculture, a drastic increase compared to only 3% of all employed women and 4% of all employed men in 1990<sup>13</sup>. This shift from subsistence to waged agricultural work amplifies issues of gender inequality and economic disparity since women tend to be earn lower wages.

The gender wage gap is one of the reasons that women struggle to earn a sufficient income to purchase food. When working on commercial farms, women and men are assigned different tasks. Women are employed for tasks perceived to be 'easy to learn' and that do not use much physical strength (e.g. planting, weeding), whereas men are assigned tasks that require physical strength, usage of tools or giving orders/appearing authoritative (i.e. planting, pruning, irrigation)<sup>13</sup>. Consequently, the gender wage gap is dependent upon tasks, farms and crop types. Even when women perform skill-intensive tasks, men are paid 25% more on average<sup>13</sup>. On smaller farms, while women tended to have a higher pay compared to commercial ones, the wage gap was larger<sup>13</sup>.

## **Resolutions:**

Morocco has recently made efforts towards gender equality. These are outlined in article 19 of the 2011 Constitution, which establishes that men and women should enjoy equal freedoms in all situations and prohibits the exclusion of women in religious organizations and property transfers<sup>4</sup>. In addition, Morocco has recently aligned itself with the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. However, a strong sense of traditionalism and patriarchal cultural order has slowed tangible progress down significantly<sup>4</sup>; therefore, efforts are needed to accelerate changes.

Education is key to addressing gender inequality. Under-educated women in rural communities are often disadvantaged. Access to education is one of the most important means of solving issues of human rights. Educating children, particularly girls, in rural communities should be a priority. I recommend that the Moroccan government provide incentives to rural communities and the families within them to be used solely for continuing a child's education past primary school. The current program known as the *Tissir* provides stipends to parents in regions with high drop-out rates and high poverty. Extending this program beyond primary school would help children become valuable members of the economy, whether they work in the agricultural sector or migrate to urban areas. There is a need for more schools in rural areas. Government and non-governmental organizations should provide funds for construction of schools and roads in rural areas. Programs that incentivize teachers to remain in rural communities are needed. These programs could set targets to increase the number of female teachers

Another recommendation is to implement a nation-wide school lunch program. Moroccan schools typically do not serve school lunches and students are expected to eat at home before returning for class. This effort could be subsidized by the Moroccan government and/or with support from non-governmental agencies. Programs should be community driven. Benefits from such a program could include a market for local food, employment of women in rural communities, and increased nutrition for children, especially those from low income and food insecure households. Oversight of such programs is necessary to avoid corruption and abuse of funds, as corruption is rampant in public services<sup>14</sup>.

One solution being implemented in rural areas, especially the southern regions of Morocco, are women's cooperatives. Women's cooperatives are beneficial for a few reasons: they provide direct employment of women as well as a steady income, they give women the opportunity to solidify a role in socioeconomic development, and they increase women's skillsets in an effort to provide transferable experience to other jobs<sup>15</sup>. In 2009, my family drove through rural parts of southwest Morocco and I had the opportunity to visit a women's cooperative that was based on the production of argan oil. Argan oil is becoming increasingly popular in Europe and North America due to its moisturizing properties and richness in vitamin C and E<sup>16</sup>. The women's cooperatives for argan oil production provided local women with more economic opportunities in the places that they lived. Instead of selling argan kernels, the women used traditional methods to process them into high value argan oil that they sold directly to buyers. In this example, I would suggest that cooperatives try to market their products to consumers interested in purchasing sustainably produced goods, either directly or through distributors. Nonetheless, it is important to make sure that the argan oil marketed is actually produced by women's cooperatives. Often, there is an educated man at the head of the cooperative, and women who work there tend to be employed as day laborers instead of cooperative members with a stake in the enterprise<sup>17</sup>. In this instance, I would suggest that consumers research before purchasing goods to make sure that the cooperative they are buying from helps rural women directly (for example: L'Union des Coopératives des Femmes pour la production et la commercialisation de l'huile d'Argane, or Women's Cooperatives Union for the production and commercialization of argan oil is an organization funded by foreign development agencies to help support and professionalize women's cooperatives<sup>17</sup>). Additionally, women's cooperatives could be expanded to other traditional high-value crops in Morocco such as saffron.

One final suggestion I would make is for Moroccan women to be empowered to play a role in combatting climate change. The differences of privilege in Morocco, especially those relating to class and/or gender, means that certain people are more vulnerable to the effects of a changing climate. Not only will rural women be disproportionately affected by climate change, they are at the forefront of fighting it because they often manage agricultural practices on subsistence farms. Programs aimed at sustainable production, such as agricultural extension programs, must be targeted to women. Organizations such as FAO and the World Bank should provide funds and capital necessary to complete this potential project.

Morocco has made progress towards gender equality, as evidenced by its new constitutional laws on the inclusion of women. However, we still have a long way to go. There is an increasingly widening chasm between the rich and poor, as well as depletion of natural resources and rural migrations into urban areas. Gender inequality will only continue to worsen as negative effects of climate change hit women from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, it is important that the Moroccan government and non-governmental organizations assist programs aimed at improving (rural) women's welfare. I believe that Morocco must continue to progress in terms of human rights if it wants to be more stable environmentally and politically.

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