

Moroccan Women on the Market: Working Towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals

Douae Serraf

Mohammed I University, Morocco

Abstract

Sustainable Development Goals, also known as SDGs, are a global project adopted in 2015 by the United Nations to better build world peace and dismantle a number of social and ecological injustices by 2030. The seventeen goals outline a number of universal challenges, and their implementers are committed to working toward a world of sustainability where no individual is left behind; from eradicating poverty and protecting the planet to reducing inequalities and empowering women. In 2017, Morocco, in spite of its lack of social balance, implemented a strategy to convert to a green and inclusive model. Although the Moroccan context is different from that of Western and other developed countries, the attempted policies require a significant evolution within various sectors of life, such as education, economy, marriage, environment, social awareness, and a multitude of other sensitive spheres. Society, however, is already witnessing remarkable progress regarding the situation of women, as it responds actively to current transformations in gender roles. With Moroccan women's entrance to the marketplace, also named 'Suq' in the Moroccan dialect, female members of society, especially in rural areas, have gained agency and independence, both financially and personally. On the other hand, traditions and inherited norms imprison women, preventing them from healing from patriarchal mindsets and discriminatory dimensions and impeding them from breaking the so-called glass ceiling. Therefore, a different approach must be implemented in the Moroccan context to eradicate the overall misogynistic gender understanding.

This exploratory research attempts to address a number of issues related to women's sustainable growth in the Moroccan marketplace as well as identify the many discriminations experienced by women there. In order to understand gender in the market and the overall desired sustainable growth, the qualitative study will adopt an intersectional perspective. As a result, the call to prioritize women and those who are furthest behind ensures a greater quality of sustainability, global growth, and local comprehension.

Key words: United Nations, sustainable development goals, Morocco, marketplace, gender, global understanding

Empowerment, according to Kabeer (1999: 346), is "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability." In a context where women are expected to be obedient and submissive to male-dominated norms, Moroccan women tend to gradually seek autonomy, both financially and personally. Women in Morocco are overcoming gender barriers and categories by entering the market and earning money for activities that were previously provided as part of a family and societal responsibility. Morocco has experienced dramatic growth

in women's public presence over the previous decade, as well as a fundamental rearrangement of the gender-based distribution of work. Not long ago, women were only responsible for home tasks and assisting men in the fields. They couldn't travel anywhere or manage their money on their own. However, social change has taken place.

We cannot discuss empowerment without analyzing the concept of power. This sociological notion is extended by Foucault, as he extends the understanding of power to “all fields of the social sciences and the humanities” (Sadan, 2004, p. 37). The notion is not allocated to individuals or to institutions; rather, it is the means through which discourses are constructed and communicated. Instead of defining power as “a finite entity that can be located” (Rowlands 1998: 13), Foucault (1982) models power relations in terms of knowledge and language, which shape institutions and everyday practices in the form of social networks, with resistance as the necessary antagonist to power. Hence, Foucault views power from a post-structuralist perspective (Leder, 2012, p. 5). Women and power are disassociated in terms of social order, particularly in Morocco, where men are the main protagonists of the legal and social discourse, and women merely generate the reproduction cycle.

The entrance to the marketplace is not simply a result of financial necessity or generational development. Instead, it is the accumulation of years of damage and oppression. In 21st century-Morocco, a married woman, after gaining her husband's verbal permission to find a job, would face one of two situations. The first one is that her spouse would take control of her money and she would eventually become a slave to his financial needs. The other situation is that he would allow this pursuit of a career in the name of supporting the family. If approached by a friend or a neighbor, he would justify his permission as a must due to price increases, high rent expenses, or his inability to cope with things “nowadays”. Therefore, this study aims to explore the so-called Moroccan marketplace to examine women's behaviour and their gradual change toward sustainability.

The study of individual complexities and gender role change requires primarily examples, case studies, and an inclusive approach so as to not leave any components missing.

“Seeing poor women as individuals who pursue entirely independent and goal-oriented strategies, as is often the case in discourses on ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’ in development, is to deny the complexities of their relational ties and the contingencies of lived experience.” (A. Cornwall, 2007, p. 158)

Cornwall addresses the issues of power dynamics where women often receive socially assigned submissive positions as well as being victimized and considered disempowered in the public sphere. However, some of the complexities Cornwall analyses in his theory are the fact that women are decision-makers in their households and that empowerment is not an issue. His reflection is based on the environment he administered, which is completely different from other contexts. Morocco, for instance, is one of the lowest-ranked countries with regard to gender equality and awareness. These conventions that Cornwall shares are far from being applicable to

Moroccan households. Men were, are, and will remain the most powerful agents in society if individuals are incapable of embracing change.

Throughout this paper, a reading of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals as well as Deborah Kapchan's *Gender on the Market* shall be employed to identify women's empowerment in the Moroccan marketplace. An intersection of reality and would-be reality is an interesting strategy to cover this exploratory study. To understand the cases in their respective contexts, gender analysis along with contextual frameworks are mandatory. Thus, this analysis not only follows the steps of Rao's study (2014), which questions the belief that economic empowerment will lead to an overall greater agency but also implements an intersectional approach to determine Moroccan women's challenges when entering the 'Suq'.

When viewed from the perspective of the study's aims, the United Nations seems to be an inspiring platform through which its goals work simultaneously with women's empowerment. The United Nations is an international organization founded in 1945. Currently made up of 193 [Member States](#), "the UN and its work are guided by the purposes and principles contained in its founding Charter" (Nations, n.d.). The organization is characterized by its welcoming features, which means that nations throughout the world may come together to debate common issues and seek ways to better serve humanity. It has launched numerous programs, funds, and initiatives, including *Sustainable Development Goals* adopted in 2015 and aiming at embracing an inclusive strategy to transition to a greener planet and dismantle injustices.

There are seventeen main goals, ranging from eradicating poverty, reducing inequalities, and guaranteeing decent work and economic growth to spreading gender equality worldwide. The UN initiative attracted the eyes and attention of many countries. Though the goals are not legally binding, the governments of the UN member countries are expected to implement agendas, frameworks, and actions to accomplish their progress toward every sustainable development component. Each country holds the immense responsibility of improving its citizens' lives, rights, and environment. Morocco, however, joined the campaign only in 2017, challenging its society's deepest fear: change. Although the Moroccan pace is relatively slow, the decision-makers, along with an increasing number of citizens, accepted the challenge and gradually approached the transition.

Social change comes with many benefits, such as progress, new rights, cultural acceptance or tolerance, and equality. However, it also brings a great amount of criticism as well as resistance. Members of society tend to reject new ideas or approaches, justifying their behavior as a mere defense of their norms and traditions against western ideologies. Similarly, in Morocco, there are some people who do not agree with the occurring changes, especially in gender diversity or man-woman equality. The social balance in the Moroccan context is based on the dominance of males and the obedience of females. Although women gradually broke the glass ceiling in the 1950s by pursuing education while it was ruled and dominated by men, they were labeled as women of bad reputation, and unfit for marriage.

With female individuals defying the mainstream mindset and jeopardizing their social image to better serve future generations and guarantee their rights, their financial

dependence on their male partners remains one of the essential elements that triggers their misery and 'imprisonment'. When a woman marries, she immediately falls under the umbrella of traditions and may be subject to a number of conditions from her soon-to-be spouse, as he may allow himself to utter in the presence of her family members that he wishes for her to be a stay-at-home wife. If she happens to be working, he wants her to quit her job no later than the wedding. Nothing about these requests seems strange to the parties involved, as it is extremely common for the woman to follow her husband's wishes. He might even require her to withdraw from any grade of her education to free her time and take full care of her family. At such proposals, a woman is never allowed to speak or disapprove of the offered conditions since the men in her family own guardianship and responsibility for marriage-related decisions. The Moroccan constitution never granted men authority over women. However, since Morocco is mainly a tradition-oriented country, most decisions and practices usually are governed by norms and religion. Despite the fact that these events still take place in Moroccan society, slight changes are being incorporated.

Women in Morocco are far from being the only females in the world to be on the receiving end of similar injustices. In the Arab world, a woman's money might be seen as a man's business and, in one way or another, women are held accountable for trying to become independent. As demonstrated in Beijing's research, UN Women argued,

When women are poor, their rights are not protected. They face obstacles that may be extraordinarily difficult to overcome. This results in the deprivation of their own lives and losses for the broader society and economy, as women's productivity is well known as one of the greatest generators of economic dynamism. (In Focus: Women and Poverty | UN Women – Beijing+20, n.d.)

If it is fair to assume that women generally happen to have fewer advantages than men, poverty makes their situation considerably worse. They have less access to public services and care, and their health conditions are particularly dependent on men's blessings. It must be frustrating for a woman to wait for another person to pay for her shower or to be unable to buy her own period supplies. The problem itself is not unidimensional due to the complexity of the challenges involved.

If we were to study the situation of women in Morocco, we would understand that it is not simply a matter of gender, race, or class discrimination. Each of these types of discrimination, when considered separately, causes a lower level of injustice than they do together. In this study, it is fundamental to adopt an inclusive approach that takes into account the simultaneity of identity dimensions. Intersectionality names the struggles and stories of individuals and authenticates experiences. A wealthy woman's narrative is different from that of a poor woman. A rich Muslim woman residing in Morocco is seen differently than a poor woman living in a more developed country. Therefore, not only is it an issue of uniqueness, oppression, and privilege, but it is also a case of the comparative amount of discrimination. Taking the overlapping types of discriminations into consideration, we should be able to analyze the entrance of Moroccan women into the marketplace with respect to its complexities. "Without an intersectional lens, our efforts to tackle inequalities and injustice towards women are likely to just end up perpetuating systems of inequalities." (Intersectionality 101: What Is It and Why Is It Important?-Womenkind Worldwide, 2019).

Gender on the Market, a book by Deborah Kapchan, a professor of performance studies at New York University, is a project about Moroccan women's representational culture and how it both inspires and reflects current gender role shifts. The book illustrates how gender and economic relations are experienced and understood in women's aesthetic activities, beginning with their appearance in the marketplace (suq), which has been viewed as the most stereotypical of Moroccan patriarchal institutions. Kapchan sees the marketplace as a forum for transition where people enjoy a higher level of social license (p.3). Thanks to this transition, women can go shopping in the Suq, buy their children's gifts and school bags, and if their children are ill, they can afford to purchase their medications. They no longer have to ask or beg their husbands for money to buy what they desire.

Throughout the book, Kapchan displays a series of sectors where women were capable of showing agency and becoming autonomous. With their entry into the market, Moroccan women gradually made careers out of weddings and their planning. They first started cooking and cleaning as 'Tyabat', the Moroccan dialect word for cooks, and developed it into an extremely requested job area: "nagafat". Wedding planners, appeared on the job market to provide the bride and groom with the most sophisticated gowns and accessories. Noticeably, there have been several changes in the treatment of brides from the older styles of weddings to the modern ones, in which women are no longer hidden according to honor and shame ideals but are openly exposed. Covering women's faces and bodies is believed to be extremely protective and appealing to social standards in places where traditions and religion take precedence. What is more, women of marriageable age in Morocco are often chosen based on their physical attractiveness, social status, financial capabilities of their families, skin color, health, and whether or not they are veiled. The perfection of a woman's identity labels and categories is the intersection of an ideal prospect or purportedly future bride. Thus, this is where the intersectional method comes into play, since if we disregard this selection, the incidence of discrimination rises, eventually leading to a return to the inherited patriarchal system.

In Kapchan's book, the protagonist, Fadela describes tradition in terms of ideal purity untainted by foreign influence (p. 156). A woman, in the 18th and 19th centuries, in transition to getting married during her seven-day wedding is continuously living under a tent of cloth covered with veils and an earthy substance such as plants, and mud tightened around her forehead. She is not allowed to wear any makeup until the morning following her defloration, 'sbouhi', and she is prevented from seeing the groom until they officially get united. According to Kapchan, contemporary weddings are evolved forms of tradition, fashionable and inspired by western countries. Real opportunities for women are arising; female professionals happen to frequently govern brides instead of their female relatives.

The second well-known sector of the Moroccan market is housecleaning. Although maids and housekeepers are financially independent, they are still very vulnerable (?) In the Moroccan setting, where there is historical precedent of the physical abuse of children, servants, and women, the use of corporal punishment does not seem to surprise anyone. "The young maid is subject not only to social stigmatization but to physical abuse and finite salaries." (p. 232). Even when physical discipline is not enforced, female servants are often characterized as wicked or as females with

doubtful backgrounds, “bnat lthram”. Their salaries are of limited purchasing power and are still usually taken by their parents or other family members. However, in pursuit of social progress, the government guaranteed rights for this so-called minority.

Currently, cleaning ladies earn their own income. They have the power to bargain for their wages instead of just receiving their keep; fight their employer’s violence; and have more freedom: the freedom to choose where to work, when to start, and when to leave. Clearly, it is not the case for all working women. Some of them are still in need of help and liberty and are considered threats to the female homeowners. “Because of the maid’s physical proximity to the nuclear family, the middle class finds it necessary to exclude her psychologically.” (p. 232). However, the transition to a better environment is happening, and it is merely a matter of when.

Herbalists, the third sector mentioned in Kapchan’s book, cover a wide market area in Morocco. Kapchan argues: “Women are emerging as key players in these social performances. The enactment of artistic license by women orators brings the negotiation of gender, and definitions of honor and shame regarding gender into public focus.” (p. 103). ‘Achaba’ or a herbalist admits the shameful nature of her speech by rationalizing it, claiming that religion and medicine both address vital issues, such as sexual incapability, spinsterhood, or sterility publicly and with impunity. Shame in her speech lies in what is known to be taboos according to the majority of Moroccans. In this regard, discussing sexual intercourses, fantasies, or simply pleasure is perceived as ‘hchouma’ or shameful. The herbalist’s contribution is strongly manifested in dismantling restricted, hidden topics and giving voice to the unspoken. The expression ‘la haya2a fi din’, which means that there is no shame in religion, is frequently used to deflect the embarrassment that is elicited while talking about sexual deeds. On the one hand, female herbalists are despised by society since they sell herbs and provide health care recipes; on the other hand, they are perceived to be witches and sorcery experts. Therefore, they face instant exclusion from respected families and their gatherings. However, women’s power in this sector lies in the reality that the herbalist’s speech defies conventional rules of honor.

Society, then, is witnessing a significant change in the situation of women as it responds simultaneously to contemporary gender role adjustments. The marketplace is slowly becoming gender-tolerant as women are engaging in various sectors and are somehow not judged or oppressed because of their work. However, although herbalists and servants are increasingly tolerated and treated with respect, they are still viewed as women with questionable jobs and pasts. Morocco’s transition toward the United Nations’ sustainable development goals is significantly apparent in terms of decent work, economic growth, reducing inequalities, and gender equality, with women moving into paid employment outside their houses in ways that their mothers or grandmothers could only dream of. The rising number of women in the labor force reflects Morocco’s policy since Mohammed VI became king in 1999, when the new monarch declared a new phase in which the nation would concentrate on promoting women’s rights. Women moved to integrate the known to be male-dominated occupations and succeeded in eradicating the discriminatory entitlement. Sectors that used to be strictly reserved to men, as police, medicine, technical sectors, including IT and engineering, management and politics, have now become appropriate for women as well.

Although more women are working, they are still paid less than men. As well, at the top of industry and government, the faces remain stubbornly male. Women are still unable to pursue a pilot career nor simply drive a bus. To this day, no woman was capable to achieve head of government, who might play in favor of women's progress. However, when evaluating social change in Morocco, resistance and evolution are inevitable variables, that eventually would lead to a certain balance and sustainability. The suggested study aimed to identify the injustices raised against women in the Moroccan context and marketplace as well as give voice to their stories, intersections, and complexities. No matter how evolved the situation of women seems to be, the intersectional analysis remains rather difficult to adopt since the culture is complex.

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Author Notes

Douae Serraf obtained her MA degree from Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University-Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Dhar El Mehraz, Fez, Morocco. Douae is a Ph.D. candidate in the Communication, Education, Digital Usage, and Creativity research laboratory at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Oujda, Morocco. She is also a visiting professor in the English department at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Mohammed I University, Oujda. Serraf is also a Moroccan delegate of UNICEF at the MUN and the Vice President of the Association of Cultural Ecology and Communication, Oujda, Morocco.

douaeserraf@gmail.com