

# Rural Women and Socioeconomic Changes in Morocco. Gender Implications of the Arrival of Tourism in a Berber Community

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This article examines the process of change currently experienced by the Berber ethnic group of the Ait Haddidou, who live in the most eastern part of the High Atlas Mountains (Morocco), specifically in the Assif Melloul Valley. This analysis focuses on how this process is influencing Haddidou women, who are the most vulnerable and poverty-stricken.

## Introduction

The region where this group lives is characterised by a weak population density and water scarcity (Berriane, 2002). It has extreme weather, very cold in winter and with growing Saharan aridity. Its human groupings are located in the valleys, by the rivers, where there are oases that make it possible to maintain an irrigated agriculture aimed at self-consumption (and where there are many villages built of mud). The Assif Melloul Valley comprises 21 villages over a surface area of 49 kilometres. At present, it is estimated that around 20,000 people live there. The region today is still extremely isolated and, in winter, it is particularly inaccessible due to snow, ice and deficient transport infrastructures (Laouina, 2002).

Livestock breeding continues to be the main activity of the Ait Haddidou, while agriculture is complementary to grazing as the valley offers few agricultural possibilities due to its location between high mountain ranges. Livestock breeding is extensive and based on natural fodders while sheep grazing is possible thanks to the use of high pastures in summer (Laouina, 2002: 362). They are nomadic shepherds who, in order to survive, practise winter transhumance as the cold temperatures are incompatible with grazing.

## The Situation of Haddidou Women in the Moroccan Context

Morocco is a country with major differences between development levels in rural and ur-

ban areas, the former with greater poverty and more difficult living conditions. This means that although Moroccan women in general have higher levels of social vulnerability than men, women living in rural areas are even more poverty-stricken and socially-excluded. As Berriane (2002b: 343) points out, the Moroccan mountain areas have been marginalised by the public authorities and there have been no real efforts to provide them with facilities as has happened in prairie areas. This is especially important if we take into account that mountains cover 21% of the national territory (Berriane, 2002b: 342-343).

At present, rural women still endure serious shortcomings in terms of basic facilities. For instance, access to drinking water and electricity continue to be major obstacles for rural communities although in recent years important efforts have been made to increase the number of rural communities with these resources. Moreover, we cannot forget that, as the UN states, within the priority needs of the rural world, electricity occupies first position, followed by roads and access to drinking water as the deficiency in basic infrastructures results in higher poverty levels (UNDP, 2000: 16-18).

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Haddidou women suffer from the same deficiencies that affect the rural world in Morocco in general and, as happens in other rural populations of the country, they also suffer the consequences of the patriarchal and patrilocal system, whose norms and functions empower the male community. The marked gender division of work marginalises women who are banned from having a paid job, which condemns them to financial dependence on the men of their family. Traditionally, in Haddidou

society men were regarded as warriors – faced with the historical need to defend the territory –, while women were responsible for looking after the family, thereby resulting in balance and complementarity in the tasks they perform (Kasriel, 1989). However, after Independence – Morocco was a French-Spanish colony from 1912 to 1956 –, Haddidou men lost their military role while women continued to perform the same functions and therefore the social system entered a situation of imbalance which has persisted until today. Moreover, in the mid-1970s, some men went to work in the area of the Middle Atlas. This salaried male employment broke up the old organisation of labour which until then had delegated to women the role of taking care of the family. Since then, new opportunities have gradually emerged, exclusively for men, of paid work.

Therefore, within the group there has been an overexploitation of women as they carry out most domestic and agricultural tasks and also manage the family economy unpaid. Meanwhile, political representation in the valley is the exclusive responsibility of men as they hold all positions. Generally, the presence of women in the political arena is still very weak in Morocco and practically non-existent in the Assif Melloul Valley. In Moroccan society this situation is partly balanced by the presence of women in NGOs (United Nations, 2001: 26). Nevertheless, in the Assif Melloul Valley men also have responsibility in this sector and carry out most of the tasks.

The 1970s brought about a series of socio-economic transformations that have marked the current development process underway in the Haddidou community and which involved the start of the current process of salaried employment. This was the decade when the valley opened up and was increasingly linked to the national economy, which increased poverty levels in the region and, finally, resulted in the Ait Haddidou emigrating to other regions of the



AitYazza woman (María Jesús Berlanga).



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country. Moreover, at that time tourism began to develop in the valley. These developments could be seen in the livestock sector as the group began a process of sedentarisation, reducing the size of the flocks although it continued to be their major means of survival. This situation hastened the destabilisation of the hitherto prevalent subsistence economy leading to the introduction of a precarious market economy, which has fostered the salaried employment process of the community but with increased social and gender inequality, with all its consequences.

We can say that the emergence of salaried employment in the Haddidou community al-

most exclusively affects men, as in sectors such as trade, NGOs, tourism and the administration the paid jobs created are mainly aimed at and occupied by the male population. Hence, men have incorporated to a greater extent into the economic sectors that are fully integrated into the market economy, in contrast to women, who find themselves relegated to unpaid jobs in the sectors that form part of the subsistence economy. This situation has unavoidably increased gender inequality within the group, in which the male sector clearly benefits and women are disempowered, thereby increasing their dependence on men and diminishing their social value.

## Tourism and Gender Inequality among the Ait Haddidou

One of the factors that have greatly transformed Ait Haddidou society in recent years has undoubtedly been tourism, an activity which began in the valley in the late 1970s, and was consolidated in the following decade. The tourism sector is imbued with a system of gender stratification as it is surrounded by constructed social processes in which gender relations are hierarchical and unequal (Kinnaid and Kothari, 1996: 95). Thus, we must take into account that tourism activity has penetrated the Haddidou community, a patriarchal and patrilocal society, in which a regulatory gender system prevails. Such rules prohibit the paid work of the women in the group, limiting their economic contribution to the subsistence economy. Moreover, they also prohibit women's contact with people from outside the community. We must also stress the fact that tourism has reached a society in which authority is only held by men, given that power and control are structured, among other factors, by gender relations.

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Although we previously mentioned that after the arrival of the market economy in the region women had continued with both their reproductive and productive work within the subsistence economy aimed exclusively at meeting the needs of the family group while men enjoyed salaried work with greater social value, tourism activity has consolidated this process.

One of the most important consequences of the arrival of tourism has been the appearance

of a notable imbalance in terms of the gender distribution of work in the community. With the arrival of tourism in the region, men have found a new source of income, while for women it has meant an increased workload – still unpaid – as they have to add to their daily tasks those involved in this new activity. In the case of the women of those families who have benefitted more from this activity, they have been able to abandon determined agricultural tasks that were tough and concentrate on those related to tourism. For this reason, other local women receive a salary and carry out the agricultural tasks that they have left. This situation would undoubtedly result in greater and more obvious social inequality, undervaluing female agricultural tasks even more, if such a thing were possible.

Thus, the process of salaried employment, hastened by tourism itself, has mainly benefitted men while women have remained in the sphere of the unpaid subsistence economy. Women have progressively been dispossessed of their productive function, and have remained in a position of subordination. And as Kasriel rightly argues (1989: 72-73), simultaneously with these changes women have also lost part of their identity. Moreover, the system of symbols of the group, which attached great importance to the warlike prowess of men, has been transformed, giving way to a new economic rationality which has enabled the emergence of a new concept of social value based on the accumulation of goods and money. Thus, men are the great beneficiaries of these transformations of the system, improving their status within the community, while women continue to be excluded from its benefits, losing power, increasing their dependence on men and being more undervalued.

This current situation of tourism privileging men will tend to intensify over time given that most of the income derived from this new activity is being reinvested in the extension and

improvement of the initial tourism projects, which will tend to gradually increase the profits and power of the current male owners of the tourism facilities while women will only receive their benefits indirectly, generally through the men in their families.

To this we should add that at present only men can improve their qualifications based on the training initiatives launched by NGOs, which with time will contribute to keeping women in the least qualified job positions with less social value. This process therefore becomes a vicious circle because, as Kinnaird and Hall (1996: 96) state, the best jobs are related to a higher accumulation of human capital, while women remain in a disadvantageous situation.

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However, it is also impossible to believe that women will not attempt to break this vicious circle because, although the relations of domination are revealed in the gender division of work in the tourism field, as Bourdieu (2000: 26) argues: “there is always room for a cognitive struggle over the meaning of the things in the world and in particular of sexual realities [...]. The partial indeterminacy of certain objects authorizes antagonistic interpretations, offering the dominated the possibility of resistance to the effects of symbolic imposition.” In fact, there have been cases of women within the community who seek to overcome these regulatory limits that prevent them from having a paid job. Tourism also means greater opportunities of independence for the female group, bearing in mind that visitors bring new values to the places they go, fostering the emergence of new aspirations for a better life. In this way, in recent years a Haddidou woman has begun

to run one of the hostels in the valley by herself and two others are working as waitresses in coffee shops in Imilchil. However, common to all these cases are the different degrees of penalisation suffered by women for breaking with what their community expects of them. In any case, this has not prevented them from continuing with their projects.

Finally, new aspirations are emerging generally resulting from the arrival of tourists in the region, which can lead to the desire of many local youths to emigrate, as happens among the Ait Haddidou. We can say that the direct interaction of local people and visitors facilitates emigration as it provides them with the necessary contacts and, in many cases, the learning of languages. Indeed, there are several cases in Assif Melloul of youths who have emigrated with the help of tourists they met when they were visiting the region. However, tourism does not only act as a platform for migration in the case of Haddidou men. Some young women are also seeking to establish contacts with visitors which can enable them to leave Morocco and improve their economic situation. Nevertheless, their strategy involves marriage with a tourist as it would be unthinkable for a Haddidou woman to leave the family home without being married. Thus, a woman from Imilchil married a Belgian visitor with whom she had three children. Each year she goes back on holiday and has become an example that many young women wish to follow. For this reason, it is not uncommon for women to openly tell the male tourist about their desire to marry or ask them to introduce them to a friend who wishes to marry them. This is clearly relevant in Haddidou society, in which women have traditionally remained anchored to the territory while men go out to work or conduct their personal business in nearby towns. Although this situation is surprising in this society, which reveals the gradual process of transformation underway within it, it is even more surprising

that some tourist agents wish to send their young daughters to Europe so that they can learn languages from tourists who have become friends and have offered to help. Thus, hopefully the next generation of Haddidou women will have access to jobs and sectors which until now have been denied to them.

## Conclusions

The Haddidou community has been immersed in a process of profound transformations, mainly from the 1970s when salaried employment began and which, since then, has benefitted the male community. Haddidou women continue to be linked to unpaid work within the subsistence economy, which has condemned them to financial dependence on the men of the group.

The arrival of tourism in the region has consolidated this process even more. Paid jobs in the sectors are carried out by men while for women it has only meant an increase in their workload.

However, the emergence of new factors of change, such as television, Internet or tourism, has enabled women's access to new values coming from abroad. This has resulted in the appearance of new aspirations within the female group. Tourism enables the establishment of personal relations with the outside world and learning languages, which in the midterm could become an efficient platform for emigration. Moreover, the appearance of women who have started paid work in the tourism field – although they are still few and are being penalised by their community due to the transgression that this involves – leads us to believe that this phenomenon will extend to other women in the future.

This process has fostered a dynamic of socioeconomic destructuring in the group, which was previously relatively egalitarian and in which conflicts of interest were resolved within

it. The arrival of an incipient market economy in the region has entailed new forms of social inequality, such as the increase in gender inequality and greater social fragmentation while favouring growing individualism. This removes power from the community as such, which is increasingly fragmented and must respond to diverging interests.

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The result of all these transformations on the daily life of people is that individualism is gradually replacing the traditional forms of community organisation, which will contribute to the degradation of the socio-cultural system of the group and to its fragmentation as a community. This process may finally influence women because men have more of their own ways and strategies to escape or dilute the effects of the changes underway. However, part of the female group will inevitably start experimenting with new individual alternatives that help them escape the situation of vulnerability in which they currently find themselves, such as emigrating or receiving a salary for their work, even though this means the transgression of the traditional community norms. The fundamental question is what price women will have to pay to benefit from the changes and, above all, how far the cost will match the level of the improvements they manage to achieve.

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