

Empowerment: A Solution for Inequality in Rural Morocco

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How the practice of empowerment has the potential to be the key for reducing the negative impacts of alienation and inequality among women in rural regions of Morocco.

"We do not speak in front of others because we are ignorant and uneducated."

"I do not love myself."

"I do not feel confident in myself."

Imagine feeling this way about yourself.

Now imagine hearing this from your mother, sister, or daughter, and knowing that the negative self-conception that they hold within themselves is due to social and cultural constraints beyond their control.

In Morocco as well as additional Middle East North African (MENA) countries, this mentality is one that both damages and at times defines the self-image of women and girls.

Empowerment is defined by the Oxford American College Dictionary as the power given to someone to do something, and the process of becoming stronger and more confident; gaining agency. In action, it is the solution to alienation, and the source self-realization among these women.

A poor self-image can influence one's outlook on life, and potentially prevent one from realizing and achieving one's interests. However, as a result of circumstance, the perception that these women and girls in the Agerzrane village hold within themselves is not unreasonable nor unfathomable.

This village located in the High Atlas Mountains is difficult to travel to and from even by car, which is not a common possession. There are no social safety nets in proximity, including law enforcement and healthcare services. Most women have not completed school past the primary level due to the absence of a high school in the area and the great distance of about 40 kilometers of travel that would be required to reach the middle school. Even those that do attend school do not experience an immediate return on their investment in themselves, deterring them from returning to school.

The rate of illiteracy is high in rural areas, but even higher among women. Of the 35 million

people in Morocco, 22% of the people in urban areas are illiterate while rural areas have a much higher rate of 41%. Through a gendered lens, 40% of women are unable to read and write, while less than 20% of men are unable to do the same. This statistic among women impedes their potential for progress, perpetuates a lack of social and economic mobility, and contributes to damaging self-image. The High Atlas Foundation, a Moroccan-American NGO, with the help of the Moroccan government, is taking the initiative to mitigate these negative self-conceptions that create and bolster social and cultural constraints. Through the IMAGINE methodology, women led by women spend four transformative days reevaluating their worth and potential with the support of each other as they explore their goals for all areas of life: emotions, relationships, work, money, body, spirituality, and sexuality.

Participation in these empowerment workshops cultivates a change in the way these women view themselves, their lives, and their agency to make meaningful decisions that shape their futures. In fact, 100 percent of the women in the individual post-training evaluations said they saw an improvement in themselves.

“My self-confidence has increased. My personal power has increased.”

“I have to reach for my dreams despite difficulties.”

“There is no impossible.”

Through learning to adopt a positive mindset, women are experiencing a change for the better in their self-conceptions. They are more conscious of the impact that ‘adoptive’ thinking has on their decisions; they know how to affirm themselves when they are plagued with doubt and uncertainty, and they believe in their ability to set and actualize goals. Going back to school, joining a cooperative, or striving for self-fulfillment are no longer impossible or unattainable ideas.

“If you do not love yourself, you would not love others.”

“”I accept myself.”

“I feel like I have value.”

By putting their own needs and desires first, they will enjoy their lives, be better able to take care of their loved ones, and be positioned to be great role models.

A necessary element for the success of these empowerment workshops is familial and/or spousal support. Without the support of her father, or her husband, none of these women would be able or willing to attend these empowerment workshops. It is vital for Moroccan men to participate in understanding the importance of a positive self-concept for the women they love. Empowering women and mitigating gender inequality result in increased female participation in the informal job sector, increased and targeted economic productivity, and an increase in literacy of women and children.

Furthering these successes through the implementation of men’s empowerment workshops by similar non-governmental organizations could be the next step for ensuring the empowerment and positive self-perception of Moroccan women. These workshops could include segments detailing the responsibility of men to dismantle the systems that oppress the women in their lives, how those systems oppress men as well, the importance of

women's empowerment, and the steps Moroccan men can take to be active allies to Moroccan women.

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Featured image: High Atlas Foundation trainer Ibtissam Niri facilitates an IMAGINE empowerment workshop among girls and women in the Agerzrane village. (Source: HAF)

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