Is Rurality a Form of Gender-Based Violence in Morocco?

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Abstract
This essay addresses the conceptual question of how we understand gendered forms of social suffering in rural Morocco. In asking whether the fact of living in a rural area is at the root of women’s experience of discrimination, I examine the dominant frames commonly used to interpret disparate health, educational, and other development indicators. Rather than assume rurality represents a repressive social context that produces these disparate outcomes because of tradition, custom, or religion, this essay contextualizes the marginalization of rural zones in Morocco. It offers a critical account of how rural areas came to occupy a structurally marginalized position in the national polity, global labor markets, and networks of capital accumulation. This position is structural in its durability and in the ways its seeming inevitability normalizes cultural explanations for gender disparities and poverty more generally. The essay uses ethnography and an interrogation of statistical indicators to suggest how a “new feminism” might explain gendered, structural violence in Morocco’s southeast.

Keywords: Gender, rurality, structural violence, Morocco

0. Introduction
One cold January evening in 2014, I was watching the evening television line-up on 2M with Lalla Fadma, in the home she shared with
Moulay Brahim in a new district of Kelaa Mgouna, a market town at the base of the Mgoun Valley in Tinghir Province. We had waited later than usual to eat dinner because Moulay Brahim had been out all day on urgent business as member of the municipal council and still had not returned. I had rented a room from the family while I worked on a research project in the Mgoun Valley to document household land ownership, livelihood strategies, and migration histories. The project was survey-based but I had been doing anthropological fieldwork in the valley since 2010 and each and every interaction offered an opportunity to think through issues I was encountering in the more ‘formal’ parts of the research. Moulay Brahim returned that evening with a weary expression. “Did you hear what happened today?” he asked, his facial expressions indicating an expectation that I should have known. “About that American who died?” I had not heard. An older American man and his adult daughter had been rock climbing with a guide in one of the smaller gorges of the valley when the man had fallen. It was a serious fall and his daughter, traumatized, demanded to know why he was not taken to medical care more quickly. Why was there not an ambulance, or better yet, an airlift, that could take him to a trauma care facility? She did not know, perhaps could not have known, that the nearest hospital was in Ouarzazate, over two hours away, while the highest level of trauma care would only have been available in Marrakech, over five hours away by road. There was no airlift. Moulay Brahim explained to me that the only ambulance in that upper reach of the valley, a converted Land Rover, was not available at the time because it was taking a woman with labor complications to give birth in the same hospital in Ouarzazate that would have received the tourist. Local residents scrambled to arrange informal transit for the accident victim but the tourist died nonetheless. I never heard what happened to the woman in labor.

Many of the women who end up in those ambulances in the rural southeast do, in fact, die or see their infants die because of labor complications and other risk factors. Maternal, infant, and child mortality rates in rural Morocco are notoriously high and one reason why the country earns a relatively low ranking in the UNDP human development index (HDI) given Morocco’s status as a middle-income country: Morocco ranks 123 on the HDI, just below Kyrgyzstan and just above Nicaragua (United Nations Development Program [UNDP],
2018). Aware of rural women’s disproportionately low economic, health, and educational attainment, various ministries have adopted programs to reduce gender disparities. They have made progress, but I was reminded of the stubborn persistence of the problem that evening in Moulay Brahim’s home. Members of the municipal council urgently came to the aid of the American family—understandable given the tragedy that befell them far from their home—while the structural violence that the woman in the ambulance faced was broadly recognized as a reality of life. To be sure, council members regularly came to the aid of many people, especially pregnant women, requiring urgent care but there was a normality to those cases. The American expectation of timely, effective care was not applicable to the Moroccan woman, whose access to that ambulance ride to the regional capital was an improvement on just a few years before, when no one expected an ambulance to serve the remote areas of the valley. In fact, a hospital that should have handled her high-risk labor had officially opened in Kelaa Mgouna that same year. It could not, however, receive patients because it lacked the equipment and doctors to become functional. Sections of the hospital have come online in the half-decade since this incident, but the violence that woman experienced joins the everyday violence of marginalization to remain a banality of rural life.

The global inequalities that became clear that day of the tourist’s fall and the Mgouni woman’s labor complications are usually expressed in indicators separating “high”, “middle” and “low” income countries. These comparative statistics do not, however, explain the reasons for women’s social suffering nor how they experience this suffering as an everyday reality. The fact that rural women in Morocco - and elsewhere - suffer from disproportionately high levels of illiteracy and other forms of dispossession can easily lead to a naturalized explanation: that rurality itself represents a form of gender-based violence. It is the fact of living in a rural area, where infrastructure is inadequate and “tradition” devalues women, that is at the root of their poorer outcomes? In another essay, Berriane and I (2017) explore this question in the context of gendered access to collective lands, arguing that assumptions about tradition and patriarchy blame “custom” for

1 Though many Americans do not, of course, have such an expectation either, given the marked social inequalities and health disparities in the United States - but it would have been an expectation for a family with the means to travel to Morocco.
Moroccan women’s exclusion from communal land rights, ignoring the ways in which French colonial property law and dispossession helped to codify customary law as exclusionary. The analytic challenge is to historicize law, custom, and practice as situated in relations of power that are simultaneously historically-rooted and modern. Gendered forms of domination cannot, therefore, be traced to an essential cultural trait but have to be located at the intersection of relations that cut-across gender to include other forms of dispossession as well. This is particularly important in the Middle East and North Africa because, as Ennaji and Sadiqi (2011, p. 2) note, “the dominant paradigm of research on gender-based violence in MENA region is that of the victimized Muslim women and their male oppressors on the basis of culture and religion…the impact of gendered political, social, and economic power on gender-based violence is seldom addressed, and so is the role of the State in banning or punishing violence against women.” The task is not to refute the operations of patriarchy in the violence experienced by women in the region but to put patriarchy in dynamic relation with other systems of oppression.

This essay extends that analysis to resist the explanation of rurality as essential to gender-based structural violence. Such an explanation obscures critical accounts of how rural areas came to occupy structurally marginalized positions in their national polities, global labor markets, and networks of capital accumulation. These positions are structural in their durability and in the way their seeming inevitability normalizes cultural explanations for gender disparities and poverty more generally. Such explanations may acknowledge the role of the Moroccan state or historical disinvestment in the rural periphery, but they often also foreground timeless notions of tradition, patriarchy, and religion in a way that diffuses critical analysis of structural violence. Here, I follow Farmer’s (2004, p. 307) definition of structural violence, one that built on existing debates within and outside of anthropology, especially among the liberation theologians of Latin America who described the “‘sinful’ social structures characterized by poverty and steep grades of social inequality.” Farmer’s account (2011, p. 307) has since been critiqued and extended but his definition has a striking power and clarity: “violence exerted systematically—that is, indirectly—by everyone who belongs to a certain social order.” The concept moves away from pinning blame on individuals for specific
acts of violence, though those acts may still play a role, to focus on the “social machinery of oppression” (Farmer, 2011, p. 307). This social machinery works at diverse temporal and spatial scales; violence is not always a set of discrete acts with immediate and visible consequences but can unfold slowly, in ways that render that social machinery invisible and obscure the lines of causality (Nixon, 2013). The structural violence I document in southeastern Morocco grows out of historically-situated and material practices that have rendered aspects of rural life disproportionately dangerous or difficult for women. By examining women not apart from men, but as embedded in gendered relations of inequality that include men in intersectional forms of dispossession, we can better understand the causes and consequences of structural violence in Morocco’s rural areas. This intersectional approach to structural violence assigns responsibility not to geography or abstract concepts such as “tradition” or “Islamic patriarchy” but to a matrix of power, of which patriarchy is but one vector of inequality or domination.

This analysis also builds on Salime’s (2012) account, in another context, of the “new feminism” taking shape in contemporary Morocco. She offers a preliminary analysis of the surprising and fluid gender dynamics of the young people spearheading Morocco’s February 20th movement—a “territorial shift from the traditional spaces identified feminism in Morocco” that moved from the orthodoxy of largely urban women’s organizations often allied with the state to performative feminist subjectivities espousing broader projects for equality and social justice (Salime, 2012, p. 103). Her account of new forms of political organization taking shape in the February 20th Movement is relevant beyond that movement’s eventual successes or failures. Could her identification of new feminist mobilizations also extend to a new feminist analysis in Morocco? This analysis would push beyond “the usual feminist rhetoric of ‘equality’ before the law” to consider broader understandings of discrimination as embedded in practice—a phenomenological experience—and at the same time situated at the intersection of diverse social positions (Salime, 2012, p. 105). This analysis would not hold up statistics that isolate women as an object of

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2 I limit my analysis more specifically to the rural southeast where I conducted my research in an effort not to generalize across Morocco’s heterogeneous rural spaces.
analysis and policy in comparing their status to other women around the globe. Rather, it would consider women as relational and agentive subjects who are embedded in broader networks of power and sociality and at the same time, derive their senses of self and meaning from those networks. If, in Salime’s research with young Moroccan activists, the new feminism treats the question of gender equality as “too narrow to encompass the general goal of social justice that includes men and women” (2012, p. 105), then a new feminist analysis would also consider gender-based structural violence such as that experienced by rural women through a broader lens of social justice. This, in turn, brings a critical eye to the discourse of gender and development, whereby women are empowered by more powerful institutions and actors, including urban or elite feminist associations. However, accounting for the complex social environment in which women live and express their own agency involves more than adopting participatory approaches or elevating women’s voices. A meaningful acceptance of women’s agency, especially in analyzing women’s lives in the rural southeast, acknowledges that there is more than one way to assert the project of gender-based equity in rural zones, and that such discursive openness must take women’s desires, priorities, and actions seriously. In what follows, I counterpose a statistical understanding of the gendered dimensions of structural violence in the valley where I conducted my research to an intersectional analysis, mapping out a “new feminist” approach to structural violence in Morocco’s rural southeast.

1. Statistical Measures

Statistics matter. They are the language of power, policy, and economic representation and they do describe an important reality, if a partial one. Broadly speaking, women and girls experience infrastructure, economic opportunities, educational and health services, and other aspects of rural life differently from men, boys, and urban residents generally. The differences appear throughout statistical indices of human and economic development, from traditional income and poverty levels to new approaches to multidimensional poverty. I found this in my own survey work in the Mgoun Valley of Tinghir Province. In 2014-2015 and in partnership with a local network of civil society organizations, we conducted a survey of over 300 households across 18 communities documenting income, asset, and livelihood profiles of households over
a fifty-year period. This survey provided a quantitative portrait that complemented 12 continuous months of qualitative fieldwork in 2010 centered on participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews, and extended case studies of households in three rural communities in the Mgoun Valley. Each year since 2010, I have returned on average a month each year for follow up research, the household survey, and new research on natural resource management and other resource access issues. Our findings dovetailed with national human development indicators: in our sample, women and girls had illiteracy rates of 45% percent as compared to men and boys (18% percent). We also documented almost no wage earning on the part of women, who nonetheless participated in all aspects of agricultural production and various other forms of labor. Few, however, had their work remunerated in wage form, though as I discuss later, this statistic does not capture the complexity of women’s labor force participation. The objective of our household survey was not to examine gendered disparities, but they nonetheless emerged as an affirmation of national data.

On the whole, women in Morocco experience significantly higher illiteracy rates, in large part because of rural disparities in educational attainment: overall illiteracy is 42% for women and 22% for men, but Table 1 shows the role of rural disparities in the breadth of these gaps. While 98% of rural girls (compared to 99% of rural boys) were enrolled in primary school in 2015-2016, that number dropped to 33% for collège and 10% for secondary school (compared to 35% for rural boys and 78% for urban girls/70% for urban boys at the college level, and 9% for rural boys and 54% for urban girls/ 43% for urban boys) (Royaume du Maroc, 2017, p. 46).

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Maternal mortality in 2015-2016 was 111 deaths per 100 thousand live births in rural areas as compared to 45 deaths for urban women.
(Royaume du Maroc, 2017, p. 15), a striking disparity that reflects the relatively low levels of medical assistance at birth. The woman I heard about that day in Kelaa did end up having an assisted birth, but only 55% of rural women do, in comparison to 91% of urban women (Royaume du Maroc, 2017, p. 16). Women have lower labor force participation and when they do participate in the formal labor force, have significantly higher unemployment rates than men and urban women, though I will explore the problems with describing women’s labor using these formal statistical definitions (Royaume du Maroc, 2017, pp. 60, 72). The rise to prominence of the Soulaliyate movement has drawn attention to disparate experiences of land ownership and by extension, women’s control over productive assets and wealth. There are no reliable statistics on women’s land ownership and such a statistic would be suspect given the ways the country’s complex collective and individual tenure systems prevent women from accessing rights to land; when they do have a right to land, actualizing these rights in the face of family pressure or economic marginalization can be difficult and even dangerous.3

The gender gaps I have outlined have persisted despite Morocco’s longstanding status as a middle-income country, with official recognition that rural-urban inequality is at the root of the country’s low HDI performance. The response has been a concerted and well-publicized series of government initiatives to address rural investment and infrastructural issues, from the rural electrification program begun in the 1990s that, according to official pronouncements, has achieved nearly universal coverage4 to systematic efforts to address barriers to girls’ school attendance. This includes constructing latrines (many rural schools have historically lacked toilet facilities) and dormitories to enable girls to attend middle school. Contemporary programs such as the Ramid insurance program attempt to make healthcare more accessible to the rural poor while Taysir provides payments to families in targeted communes as long as their children attend school. Though

3 See Berriane and Ait Mous (2016) and Berriane (2015) especially for understanding the economic and political stakes of the Soulalyiate movement.

4 Though rural residents I interviewed in my ethnographic research described a more uneven result, as many were unable to afford electricity or found coverage to be inadequate.
these payments are for both male and female children, they are seen as having a particularly important impact on girls’ school attendance.

These policies have yielded results, with trends showing improved rural literacy and health outcomes overall and reduced gaps between men and women and urban and rural areas; these trends are visible in the comparative results of the Statistical Directorate’s report on women’s development indicators cited above (Royaume du Maroc, 2017). Government interventions have followed international best practices, the suite of programs supported by international finance institutions and development agencies. The programs tend to be conceptually simple, if not practically complex, to implement: payments to families, building bathrooms in elementary schools, extending credit to women. And they follow the now accepted orthodoxy that investing in women and girls yields the highest dividends for development overall, an orthodoxy enshrined in the World Bank’s analysis of gender equity as “smart economics” and even in corporate social responsibility programs such as Nike’s campaign “The Girl Effect” (Boyd, 2016). But it is also important to understand these statistics in the broader context of rural-urban disparities. It is not simply being a woman that deepens vulnerability but living in rural areas full stop—all genders in rural Morocco have lower outcomes in key human development indictors. Thus, infant and child mortality rates in 2010 were higher for rural boys than rural girls but both are over 10 percentage points higher than urban children (Royaume du Maroc, 2017, p. 14). Similarly, the statistic above about educational attainment shows a marked drop off in school attendance for both boys and girls at the collège and secondary school levels. What is it about living in rural areas that produces these disparate experiences between rural and urban children for both boys and girls? How might we conceive of structural violence in rural zones as being gendered for all people—experienced through the prism of gender in a way that affects everyone, if we conceive of their experiences as structural violence at all? How might we see the fact of rurality as ambivalent, not simply negatively affecting women but having positive and negative dimensions for both men and women?
3. Historicizing Inequality in Morocco’s Rural Southeast through an Intersectional Lens

The mountain plateaus and steep valleys of the High Atlas, the southern and eastern oases, and the steppe of the arid plains seem inevitably underserved by infrastructure by virtue of their geography: difficult and often remote terrain. However, a historical account of how and why modern government services are distributed in the way they are needs to be located in an analysis of colonial—and then post-colonial—political and economic imperatives. Investment programs that build schools and health centers are an essential part of the solution to rural disparities and the structural violence of poverty, but they are not addressing the root of these disparities. The issue is not so much that rural Moroccans are excluded from full participation in Morocco’s economy and polity but that they are quite explicitly integrated in unequal ways. This form of integration extends to colonial policies that were encapsulated in the French colonial framework of *le Maroc utile*, the littoral plains and axis from Fes through Rabat, Casablanca and the Haouz that became the object of French interest because it was conducive to settler expropriation and commercialized agriculture (Hoisington, 1995). Many parts of *Le Maroc inutile*—the high mountains, southern oases, and outlying steppe—only received road construction to the extent that it facilitated submission to French military rule (Ait Hamza, 1993). The problem with this dichotomy as it has been taken up in contemporary scholarship is that it can downplay how these ostensibly *inutile* areas of Morocco *did* become an object of policy and integration into the larger dynamics of a rapidly changing capitalist economy. Diana Davis, Hsain Ilahiane, and others describe how policies restricting the mobility of extensive pastoralists destroyed the livelihoods and ecological relationships that maintained mountain societies and environments (Davis, 2007; Ilahiane, 1999). By rendering these populations immobile, French policy assured a flexible, urban labor force that could serve industrializing aspirations and colonial agribusiness, though this rural exodus also caused substantial political alarm about how to manage the restive urban poor and their rural hometowns (Montagne, 1952). In this historical context, disparities in levels of state investment are not simply a by-product of the littoral’s economic dynamism or proximity to population centers. Rather, the disparities reflect the importance of infrastructure as “one of major
vectors for organization of society by the state, ” a means of narrowing and directing the inclusion of rural populations in Morocco’s larger political economy along certain channels: as low-paid migrant labor, for example (Rodgers & O’Neill, 2012). The rural south has historically been marginalized, especially in terms of the infrastructure that would assure public services and education into the post-independence period. But it was not excluded: men and women alike felt the ramifying effects of an integration predicated on the dismantling or reconfiguration of their livelihoods.

The geography of rural dispossession varied tremendously from the foothills of the Saiss, which had the agricultural potential to attract foreign investment and land expropriation, to the rural southeast where I conduct my research. There, populations were seen as a labor reservoir for construction sites and commercial agricultural operations because low levels of formal education placed migrants on the lowest rung of the urban waged-labor force. All these forms of dispossession are, however, gendered by their very nature. Labor outmigration from the southeast oases began in the colonial period as chronic drought compounded the effects of Protectorate policy limiting local livelihoods. The men who left rarely took their families, shifting the gender dynamics of the remaining household in complicated ways. Households in the Mgoun valley remain largely patrilocal and patrilineal, with brothers or fathers who stay in the tamazirt (homeland) retaining primary decision-making power over farming, livelihoods, and household affairs. The existence of these gendered disparities should not obscure their changing dynamics over time or the affective costs for men who, for 2-3 generations now, have had to leave their home in order to provide for their family. In my ethnographic work on these long-term migration dynamics, I learned how men experience their manual labor in urban construction sites throughout Morocco and for the lucky few, in industrial Europe, as absence and longing. The costs for women are also complex in a migration economy that has reconfigured family life even as it enables households to remain in their rural homeland. Katherine Hoffman describes the burden of temara, the

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5 This process has been described by numerous scholars and memorialized in popular memory throughout Morocco’s rural migrant sending areas. In Rignall 2015 I place these developments in the context of shifting politics of hierarchy and agricultural production; see also Ilahiane 2001.
hard work of agriculture and social reproduction for women in the Souss who are nostalgically assigned the role of maintaining Ishelhi (Amazigh) identity by men who have long worked in the cities (Hoffman, 2008). Women may find their workloads increase not necessarily because men have left them to do their work—in the Mgoun valley, agricultural tasks tend to be gendered and male tasks are often covered by men who have stayed or by hired in-day labor—but because migration remittances fund land acquisition and an expansion of farming. Women therefore have larger holdings to work and more tasks throughout the agricultural calendar. At the same time, I knew the daughters of migrants who enjoyed better access to education and better nutrition; they were aware of the relative privilege afforded by their family’s livelihood security even as they experienced new burdens or responsibilities because of their migration experience.

The changes in rural gender dynamics as a result of this uneven integration into Moroccan and global labor markets have therefore had ambivalent effects. A colonial development framework that directed investment towards capital accumulation for the few has persisted into the post-independence period, suppressing historically important rural livelihoods, expropriating land, and neglecting investment in public services and infrastructure. At the same time, migration to the coal mines of France and Holland in the 1960s and to urban Morocco disrupted historical relations of domination based on race and indentured sharecropping; numerous scholars have described this racialized system and the ways in which modern citizenship and labor mobility have undermined those hierarchies. New forms of upward social mobility have opened for historically-repressed populations in the south. Migration has also enabled households to reinvest in their homes and livelihoods, at least in the Mgoun valley, where new forms of agricultural production are creating local markets for farmers and

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6 Historically, sharecropping constituted the dominant social relation framing agriculture and political representation in the sedentary communities in the oases: only free, landowing Imažighen (free men; sing. Amazigh) enjoyed the right of political representation, while sharecroppers, who were often categorized as racially black, suffered from political and economic exclusion. The scholarship on Morocco’s complex racial dynamics (Jacques-Meunié, 1958; Ennaji, 1994; Ensel, 1999; Ilahiane, 2001, 2004) has recently been enriched by Chouki el Hamel’s work on slavery, race, and Islam in Morocco (2013).
remittances help support “rural urbanization,” as new economic activities bring growth to small and medium market towns (de Haas, 2006). I argue, though, that it remains important to frame even these positive changes in larger terms of structural violence because of the persistent disparities in the human development indicators presented earlier. In and of themselves, statistics may tell us little about the reasons for continuing marginalization of the rural southeast, but residents articulate their experiences very clearly in terms of lack of government investment in the social and physical infrastructure that would enable them to develop their tamazirt in ways that are meaningful and effective for them. A bridge over the Mgoun river, for example, would enable villages outside of Kelaa Mgouna to send their girls to collège and would allow women to give birth in the health center more easily. A working maternity in a full-service hospital would be best, but even the pared down health center is out of reach of many. One woman I came to know well nearly died in labor because flash flooding prevented her from reaching the medical center even though it was only a kilometer away. The bridge had been washed out. That same bridge would also enable households to bring their produce to market more efficiently and in the process, strengthen agricultural livelihoods (Rignall, 2015). These improvements are one important step to addressing priorities rural residents themselves have put forth.

However, infrastructural investments do not alone resolve a historical legacy of marginalization. They are easily compartmentalized into cost-benefit analyses that focus on one aspect of gendered disparity while obscuring the complex relationship between infrastructure, political participation (how projects are geographically situated usually reflects local power dynamics not actual need), and the broader context for rural livelihoods and economic possibility. Thus, school latrine construction might yield an identifiable increase in girls’ school attendance for a time but might not address the broader structural barriers to girl’s continuing education because of limited livelihood opportunities for both men and women. Narrow interventions that address only one dimension of gendered disparities are still important, of course, but they do not necessarily address what about those disparities is both structural

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7 This not uniformly true as Hoffman describes different outcomes for the Souss, where men of working age are usually absent from their rural villages (2002 and 2008).
and violent. As Nixon notes (2013, p. 40), “slow violence involves more than a perceptual problem created by the gap between destructive policies and practices”—in this case, a colonial and post-independence legacy of disinvestment in the rural southeast—” and their deferred, invisible consequences...[it] also provides prevaricative cover for forces who profit most from inaction.” In my research, I have seen both civil society activists and residents who do not consider themselves activists point to the links between a political system that does not include the rural poor, unequal patterns of investment, and a resulting disparity in economic opportunities and political voice.

4. Reinterpreting the Structural Violence of Rural Morocco

This account of structural violence challenges unmoored concepts of tradition, patriarchy, or religion as causes of gendered social suffering to attend to the historically-situated and political processes that determine how resources and power are distributed in Morocco. However, this account can fall into the same trap as the statistical representations critiqued earlier. In emphasizing the structural violence at the root of gendered disparities, those disparities should not be taken to represent the entirety of women’s or men’s experiences. Statistics that encapsulate gender equity in a few indicators of women’s status tend to isolate women as individual or monadic subjects who can be considered apart from their social identities. When they are represented in the statistical discourse of human development as social beings they are done so as “women and children,” instrumental vehicles for the development of children or the well-being of the family (Enloe, 2014). However, neither women nor men can be dissociated from the complex web of sociality that marks their identities, social positions, and livelihoods. Concepts that are reduced to single statistics, such as women’s landownership or wage earnings, become more difficult to grasp when understood in this broader social context. Landholdings, for example, are managed and transferred in households with multiple interests and centers of power. Modes of transferring and controlling assets such as land are not a static mechanism for repressing women but have provided different opportunities for negotiation depending on the juridical and social context, as Hoffman has shown in her analysis of Berber courts during the colonial era (Hoffman, 2010). My contemporary ethnographic work has shown that a woman in a household with large landholdings may not have her own property but
effectively control agricultural production and transmission of that property depending on her status within that household. If she is a younger wife of a younger son, she may have no voice; if she is the matriarch whose husband passed away, she may direct the affairs of her sons, as I witnessed in one influential family in the Mgoun Valley. Conversely, a household with little land may also produce disparate outcomes for what is commonly termed “gender empowerment:” the senior woman in that household may have inherited what little land she has but finds her autonomy isolating rather than empowering because she does not have access to adequate land or the labor to work it. Access to land and labor is arguably more important for women’s status or livelihood security than formal ownership because they are embedded in fundamentally social networks of production, reciprocity, and care.

Considering gendered experiences of rural life as fundamentally social, then, opens up new perspectives for interpreting the relationship between rurality and structural violence. Rather than representing an exorable component of that violence, rurality can signify possibility—a site for the production of meaning and social support. To illustrate, we can return to the statistics cited above about women’s low labor force participation and wage-earning capacity. Most development analysts would quickly recognize that these statistical formulations do not capture of the complexity of rural work or social reproduction; on farms everywhere around the world there is rarely a clear separation between formal work and family life. However, my ethnographic research in the oasis fields and homes of the Mgoun Valley indicated the extent to which women’s participation in agricultural production and other economic activities is rendered invisible by formal statistical categories (Rignall, 2016). The vast majority of women in the valley participate in agricultural production and although that participation may be invisible to the Ministry of Agriculture’s data collection, it is not socially invisible in the valley. Women do, in fact, receive wages, sometimes in cash but more usually in-kind (in the form of a portion of the harvest), when they work the fields of relatives or patrons in their villages. They may control more economic activities and cash than openly acknowledged because they often remain quiet about their earnings in an effort to sustain their own autonomy over those resources (autonomy that may not be “individual” but may involve discrete coordination with
other members of their family, male and female). Their extensive networks of social reciprocity—working on others’ fields and receiving support on their own—are not divorced from men’s gendered roles in agricultural production but usually coordinated with them. These relations mean that their households sustain webs of social support, a form of insurance that acknowledges the state itself will not provide any safety net for the area’s marginalized residents. These relations also provide a strong sense of meaning to women who understand their subjectivities as fundamentally social, linked with their identities as wives, daughters, and mothers.

If Salime’s (2012, p. 105) interlocutors in the February 20th movement saw of the notion of gender equality as “too narrow to encompass the general goal of social justice that includes men and women,” so, too, might the women I encountered in southeastern Morocco understand gender as a fundamentally relational identity linked to the broader social position of their family and community. They may not espouse notions of gender typical of the feminists who came of age in an earlier era—the more elite, state-allied feminists to whom Salime refers—but their notions may be intelligible to the social movement feminists who more openly strive to entertain diverse subject positions in constructing their inclusive sense of social justice. I had many conversations with young and older women alike committed to learning to read: for them, reading was about being able to access the holy Qur’an directly, not only to ensure better educational and health outcomes for their children. I encountered women who valued their contribution to their family’s well-being as they looked for support to open their own day care facilities in the village or take on a waged job in the market town. However, they did not articulate their aspirations primarily or exclusively in terms of individual self-fulfillment, the guiding framework for gender and development discourse, but rather in terms of their socially-embedded identities as members of families, lineages and a rural Tamazirt.

5. What Might Gender Equity Look like in Rural Morocco?

In other scholarly debates in which I participate, rurality is celebrated as an affirmation of solidarity against the iniquities of capitalist accumulation and as a platform for land and food sovereignty. Women are leaders in or otherwise actively participate in movements such as
the celebrated Via Campesina or the Chipko movement in India. Yet, rurality can often acquire a different valence in the gender and development discourse that guides international development programs, official ministry initiatives, and many feminist discussions of rural women’s status. In focusing on rural women’s “lacks” - their lower level of health, educational attainment, and economic autonomy - rurality itself can become an agent of their oppression. Women do experience gender-based violence in the rural parts of Morocco where I conduct my research, but it is important to locate that violence in broader matrices of structural violence. Patriarchy is not abstractly located in the rural—or notions of tradition and custom usually elided with rurality—but produced and reproduced through structures of state power and capital accumulation that interact with cultural forms and durable social institutions.

So, what is the analytic consequence of considering the structural violence of rural life in Morocco through a gendered, intersectional lens? On the one hand, it pushes us to an expansive view of violence that both locates responsibility in diverse structures of power and accounts for the ways in which that responsibility is effaced. On the other hand, it compels us to take seriously alternative ways of understanding rural life. It is not that human development statistics are false and that we therefore need a fine-grained ethnographic perspective to give texture to women’s lives. Rather, statistics represent one story that reveals little about the diverse stories women and men themselves tell. We need to simultaneously listen to those stories and grapple with the inevitable social contestations—over gender and other forms of inequality—embedded in those stories. Many of the aspirations espoused by women in rural Morocco would be intelligible to urban or elite feminists but those that do not need to be taken seriously as expressing their lived experience not as uniformed or a version of false consciousness. While there would undoubtedly be broad agreement that gender equity would produce parity in human development indicators like literacy or mortality, limiting our analysis to those measures would ignore the complex vectors of dispossession in rural Morocco. It would also ignore the specific joys and solidarities that men and women cultivate—sometimes together, sometimes apart—in their rural homes and in their expansive social relationships that extend from rural to urban Morocco and beyond.
References


