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Najat Sarhani has been working in the field of development for over 24 years. She has supplied management support to social programmes such as water supply in rural areas, support to small children in orphanages, education and rehabilitation of people with special needs, etc. She provided follow-up for community-based projects developed by Peace Corps volunteers and supported them in the implementation of the transversal “gender and development” component. Since 1990 she has specialised in health issues, in particular hygiene and sanitation and mother and child health.

Najat was member of the Board of AMSED from 2000 to 2006, and became its Executive Director in 2007. AMSED is an NGO which specialises in organisational capacity building and manages a large national programme for the fight against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS. “Gender and development” is an important transversal component of AMSED’s work.

AMSED is Dimitra’s partner organisation for Morocco.

Women's role in sustainable food production and preserving natural resources, both land and water

Summary of a study on women's access to water management

In Morocco, as in other developing countries, women have a close relationship with both land and water. Water is present in many aspects of rural women's lives, since they collect water and manage its use in the household and they grow irrigated and unirrigated crops. This is also true of land. Female farmers tend to use and improve traditional farming methods that have been developed over many years with a view to protecting precious natural resources.

Moroccan women and access to property

The proportion of Moroccan women who have access to property in land is no higher than 7% in urban areas and 1% in rural communities. In terms of area, only 4.4% of national-level agricultural operations are run by women, and women only own 2.5% of the country's useful agricultural surface.¹

Agricultural production could increase by 20% if women had the same access as men to resources like land, seeds and fertilisers.²

The current situation has its origins in various cultural factors. Although Morocco's laws and religion grant women the right to own and inherit land, tradition forces them to renounce their claim on the land to which they are entitled in favour of their brothers. This is supposed to avoid a stranger being able to lay claim to the family's heritage (since it is sons who carry on the family name). Women's access to land is reduced even further by the difficulties they have in accessing collective land (owned by ethnic communities, under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior) and especially land that forms part of Morocco's national property (the state's private property, composed of land that has been confiscated, expropriated or, most importantly, recovered following the colonial period). Women are also unlikely to own land allocated by the state because it is usually men who receive such allocations.

The relationship between land and water serves to in-

tensify this phenomenon. Rights relating to water depend on land rights. The right to use water is granted to those who own irrigable land and can only be given to people who have agricultural funds, which rules out people who have no land or who have little land compared to others.

In this article, we will discuss the results of a field study conducted by AMSED in southern Morocco, in the regions of Dadès, in Ouarzazate, and Taroudant. The study aimed to analyse knowledge and practices as regards the relationship between gender and water, bearing in mind particular aspects of the local situation in terms of climatic, social and cultural conditions. The study focused on women's groups, organisations of agricultural water users (AUEAs), organisations of drinking water users (AUEPs) and women's organisations.

In the rural areas of Ouarzazate and Taroudant, women make up more than half of the population of the *douars*. As the men have migrated to other Moroccan towns or even moved abroad, the women assume the role of head of household. This means they are stakeholders in the local development of the region and in the social and economic changes taking place in their households. They are therefore very much affected by issues relating to water, particularly irrigation water.

The status of women in rural Morocco is generally defined in relation to men. Women go from living under their fathers' authority to living under their husbands' authority, and, by extension, the authority of their mothers-in-law. They hold no economic or decision-making power. This subordinated position leads to women being excluded from public life – instead, they are normally dedicated to bringing up their children and doing housework and other work related to water and agriculture.

This situation was particularly noticeable in Ouarzazate and Dadès – many men have left these areas, so women do

agricultural work and look after the livestock. Women therefore represent a major potential workforce, bearing in mind the small size of the agricultural enterprises they run and the fact that they farm to produce food.

Women in water management bodies in southern Morocco

Since women are viewed as subordinate, they are easily excluded from processes giving access to water management. And yet efforts for sustainable development and increased gender equality require women's full participation and involvement so they can express their needs and defend their interests.

Women's situation in this region is generally characterised by the following:

- They help to ensure their families' food security (preparing and storing basic products);
- They make up the majority of the workforce in the area and play a key role in food-producing agriculture (market gardening and animal breeding);
- They contribute increasing amounts to their households' incomes by selling produce in local markets (market gardening products, dairy products, prepared products, handicraft products and pottery).

Women therefore make a significant contribution to their family's income, but this does not reflect on their status within the family and the community as a whole.

The climate conditions in the area are often very difficult and have caused the men to leave for other Moroccan towns or even foreign countries, so women are responsible for various tasks both at home and outside the home.

The field study highlighted contradictions regarding women's role in the region. When a woman is the head of the household in her husband's stead, she is entitled to water for irrigation. She can work the land, irrigate it and take part in protecting, maintaining and cleaning irrigation canals, provided she pays a contribution to the AUEA. However, this does not grant her any privileges as she cannot take part in the AUEA's board meetings, and women seldom attend the AUEA's general assemblies. Around ten female members of the Afra Dadès AUEA attended the organisation's general assembly for 2006-2007, and even then, they sat in a separate area from the men. Women, who are seen as being inferior, have great difficulty in accessing management or decision-making positions in AUEAs or AUEPs.

Based on AMSED's initial analysis of the study, the following can be concluded:

1. Women's access to water and use of water is different depending on whether it is for irrigation or drinking;
2. Controlling and managing water remains the preserve of men;
3. 80% of the women involved in the study are familiar with the irrigation methods used in their areas: a traditional system for allocating and distributing water rights, the influence water has on agricultural development;
4. Most women have an unclear view of the body that manages water for farming (AUEA);
5. Women are familiar with the role, prerogatives and operation of the traditional organisation (jemâa);
6. Women are not familiar with the local AUEA's status, the way it works or the reasons it was created;
7. The way a household is supplied with drinking water (well, standpipe or individual connection) determines how a woman can access information and whether or not she is involved in the community.

Of the 40 organisations examined in this study, only one had a female member on its executive board. This shows that women are generally excluded from groups managing drinking and irrigation water. Keeping women in the background in this way disadvantages village communities because women make up the majority of the population in over half of the douars, given that the men have emigrated.

If a woman's husband has not emigrated, he is solely responsible for activities related to irrigation water. Men are the only ones allowed to use this water, clean irrigation canals, request and find information on the restoration project and be involved with activities run by the AUEA's executive board. They represent the women in the household, whether they are wives, sisters or friends of the family.

In addition to tradition, the social and cultural context in the two areas in the study limits women's access to using irrigation water and, as a result, prevents women from managing this vital resource.

Women participating in various meetings all expressed their need for support and guidance on the following matters:

- the collection, use, conservation and recovery of water;
- the creation, organisation, and operation of action groups;

- women’s rights and responsibilities as regards access to managing drinking and irrigation water;
- relations with water management organisations (AUEAs/AUEPs);
- the fight against pollution of irrigation water and methods to maintain the quality and hygienic standard of drinking water;
- farming techniques, animal breeding and profitable production;
- literacy and training for certain jobs.

Some obstacles to women’s access to water management

- The influence of tradition and customs;
- The failure to recognise women’s rights;
- Women’s heavy workload;
- Inadequate information;
- Women’s low level of education.

“We want to take part in everything that is related to water and we demand the right to access information”, said the members of the women’s group of Afra douar in Dadès, Ouarzazate province.

Consequently, it is important to drive the change that these women hope for with a view to allowing them to become full members of the community.

It is therefore urgent to take rural women’s hopes and needs into account by setting clear, well-defined objectives:

1. Inform women and the general public of women’s role in food production and the preservation of natural resources;
2. Build the capacities of rural women through awareness-raising and training in rights and resource management techniques;
3. Promote women’s involvement in the operation of community-based management bodies and structures;
4. Boost rural women’s incomes by developing gainful activities adapted to their local expertise;
5. Conduct more detailed research and analysis on the problems women have accessing resources and implement appropriate solutions.

Conclusion

- Whether water is used for agriculture or consumption, its management is the preserve of men;
- Women have an important role in collecting and using water, yet they remain users rather than managers;
- Access to water management is connected to land ownership, and since men (fathers, brothers or husbands) own the land, they are entitled to use the land and manage the water.

1. General agricultural census, 1996.

2. Comment by Ms Nouzha Skalli, Minister for Social Development, Families and Solidarity in the newspaper *L’Opinion*, 19 May 2008.

