

Migration as Emancipation? The Impact of Internal and International Migration on the Position of Women Left Behind in Rural Morocco

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ABSTRACT Based on quantitative and qualitative fieldwork, this paper analyses how internal and international out-migration of men has affected the position of women left behind in a rural area in southern Morocco. The results generally refute the hypothesis that migration changes gender roles. Although international migration and remittances enable women and their families to live more comfortable and secure lives, internal migration often coincides with increasing workloads and uncertainty. Although their husbands' migration leads to a temporary increase in the tasks and responsibilities of women, this new role is generally perceived as a burden and should therefore not be equated with emancipation in the meaning of making independent choices against prevailing gender norms. In a classical "patriarchal bargain", women prefer to avoid overt rule-breaking in order to secure their social position. Significant improvements in the position of rural women are primarily the result of general social and cultural change, although migration might have played an indirect, accelerating role in these processes.

1. Introduction

How does migration of men from "patriarchal" communities in developing countries affect the lives and position of women left behind? This paper aims to address this question based on an empirical study conducted in southern Morocco. In recent years, the impact of (international) migration on development in rural communities of origin has received increasing scholarly attention and also has risen high on development policy agendas. In particular, remittances have increasingly been recognized as a potential development resource (Kapur, 2003; Ratha, 2003; de Haas, 2007b).

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There is little doubt that migration has become one of the major transformative forces of rural communities in the developing world. However, the exact nature of the impact of migration on development in migrant sending communities has been the subject of heated debate over the past few decades (Papademetriou & Martin, 1991; Massey et al., 1998; Taylor, 1999; De Haas, 2005). This debate has long been dominated by pessimistic views, which—inspired by the structuralist paradigm and dependency theory—have seen migration as a force that undermines rural communities and economies in developing countries by depriving them of their valuable labour force, while remittances would be mainly spent on (conspicuous) consumption, and rarely on productive economic activities. According to such pessimistic views, migration provokes the development of passive, remittance-dependent and non-productive communities (Lipton, 1980; Binford, 2003).

Since the 1990s, such pessimistic views have increasingly been questioned by new theoretical approaches, in particular under the influence of the new economics of labour migration (NELM) pioneered by Stark (see various articles compiled in Stark, 1991). NELM offered a more subtle view, in which both positive and negative development responses are possible (Taylor, 1999). Crucially, NELM places the behaviour of individual migrants within a wider societal context by considering the household—rather than the individual—as the most appropriate unit of decision-making and analysis. NELM views migration as the risk-sharing behaviour of households, and thus integrates motives other than individual income maximization into migration decision-making (Lucas & Stark, 1985). NELM also asserts that remittances play a vital role in providing a potential source of investment capital, which is especially important in the context of the malfunctioning markets prevailing in many parts of the developing world (Stark, 1991; Taylor & Wyatt, 1996; Taylor, 1999).

NELM has striking conceptual parallels with the livelihood approaches that evolved in the late 1970s among geographers, anthropologists and sociologists conducting micro-research in rural communities in developing countries. Such approaches have also increasingly recognized the often crucial role that migration plays in strategies pursued by rural households to diversify, secure and improve their livelihoods (McDowell & Haan, 1997; Bebbington, 1999; Ellis, 2000).

This was accompanied by increasing empirical evidence that highlighted the complex, heterogeneous and context-dependent nature of migration impacts. Recent (cf. Agunias, 2006; Katseli et al., 2006; de Haas, 2007b) and less recent (Taylor et al., 1996) reviews of the empirical literature have all pointed to the potentially positive effects of migration and remittances on welfare and income growth in migrant sending communities and countries. Yet they also stressed that this impact was fundamentally contingent on the type and selectivity of migration and the more general development context in which migration takes place. Although its developmental potential is significant, migration is certainly no panacea to solve more structural development obstacles such as corruption, legal insecurity, unfavourable macroeconomic conditions and lack of political stability and trust.

In comparison with the vast literature on remittance impacts, the non-economic impacts of migration have remained comparatively under-researched. This is unfortunate, because migration has important socio-cultural and political impacts through ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital that flow from receiving-to sending-country communities (Lee, 1966; Mabogunje, 1970; Levitt, 1998). Through such “social remittances” (Levitt, 1998), migration tends to reshape migrant sending communities and societies

as a whole, affecting norms and the way migrants and non-migrants perceive the world. For instance, the daily life of migrant sending societies may become so focused on or even obsessed by migration that a “culture of migration” arises. In such cases, migration often becomes the norm, a rite of passage (Massey et al., 1993), and the main avenue of upward socio-economic mobility.

Until recently the gender dimensions of such migration–development interactions have received relatively little attention. This first applies to the migratory process itself. It is often taken for granted that female migration from “patriarchal” societies, such as Mexico or Morocco, forms part of household strategies such as family reunification and family formation (Chant & Radcliffe, 1992; Salih, 2001; Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004). Yet an increasing number of labour migrants are women, and even in “patriarchal” societies female migration is not or is no longer exclusively a corollary of male labour migration (Fadloulah et al., 2000; Salih, 2001; Carling, 2005), if this has ever been the case.

While there is a growing literature on female migrants, research on the impacts of migration on origin communities has largely overlooked the gender dimension, although such impacts are unlikely to operate in a gender-neutral way. This gender-blindness has also been the major critique of household approaches. This household focus entails the risk of reifying the household, which is often seen as a unit with a clear will, plans, strategy and aims (Lieten & Nieuwenhuys, 1989, p. 8). Criticism of household approaches has focused on the underlying assumption of the household as a monolithic, altruistic unit taking unanimous decisions to the advantage of the whole group. This may mask intra-household power inequalities (Rodenburg, 1997) and largely ignores individual decision-making and the influence of non-household members.

Instead of analysing “migration impacts”, we achieve a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of this issue if we perceive the relationship between development, gender inequality and migration as a fundamentally reciprocal one. As gender inequalities shape decisions on access to migration and remittances, the same inequalities are also likely to have an impact on the intra-family allocation of social and financial remittances. This challenges the common assumption that migration has expanded women’s power in household negotiations and in community affairs (cf. Brydon & Chant, 1989; Chant, 1997).

The limited empirical evidence that is available to test this hypothesis yields a mixed picture. Most studies suggest that migration and remittances have no or only a limited structural impact on gender roles, and may actually serve to reproduce them. Empirical research in Turkey (Day & Içduygu, 1997), Albania (King et al., 2006), Egypt (Taylor, 1984), Yemen (Myntti, 1984) and Burkina Faso (Hampshire, 2006) confirmed the view that migration does not lead to a permanent shift in patriarchal family structures. In addition, changes in gender roles are not necessarily positive. For Egyptian and Yemeni sending communities, Taylor (1984) and Myntti (1984) even suggested that the position of women might have worsened due to social remittances brought back by return (male) migrants, resulting in the growing influence of conservative, Wahabite interpretations of Islam in Egyptian and Sudanese rural areas.

By contrast, based on their research in four Guatemalan sending communities, Taylor et al. (2006) concluded that migration and social remittances may permit a gradual erosion of traditional gender and ethnic roles, but that such changes are gradual because migrants, despite their increased earnings and awareness, run into a social structure that resists rapid change. For Albania, it has therefore been suggested that transformations of patriarchal

power structures are more likely to be generational (King et al., 2006). There might also be longer-term demographic benefits from migration. Fargues (2006) hypothesized that—besides factors such as higher age of marriage, increased female labour force participation and improved education—migration from north African to European countries, as opposed to Egyptian migration to conservative Gulf countries, has contributed to the diffusion and adoption of European marriage patterns and small family norms. Such social remittances would therefore have accelerated the demographic transition in rural migrant sending regions.

It is important, however, to bear in mind that the valuation of whether such changes in women's position constitute an "improvement" or "worsening" always has a normative dimension. For instance, the positive valuation of small family norms might not necessarily be shared by traditionalist or religiously conservative analysts. This also applies in cases where out-migration of men has presumably increased women's autonomy and power. Several (male) scholars have tended to put the consequences of migration on family life in a rather negative light, while the presumed lack of "paternal authority" is said to increase delinquency among young people (Ar't Hamza, 1995, pp. 159, 164; Fadlollah et al., 2000, p. 130), although such claims are not substantiated by empirical evidence.

2. Aims and Methodology

The debate on the impacts of migration of men on the position of women left behind in rural communities is still haunted by a relative lack of empirical evidence. This certainly applies to Morocco. Since the 1960s, Morocco has evolved into one of the prime source countries of labour migrants to Europe. Over 3 million people of Moroccan descent (out of a total population of 30 million) are currently believed to live abroad. Receiving an estimated US\$5.2 billion in remittances in 2006, Morocco was the largest remittance receiver in Africa (de Haas, 2007a). The gender dimension of migration impacts has received only scant attention in the Moroccan migration and development literature, which is largely focused on economic impacts and the position of the (predominantly male) labour migrants and (supposedly male) "household heads" (cf. Hajjarabi, 1995). Some authors have suggested that migration has encouraged the emancipation of rural women in Morocco, as, in the absence of their husbands, their responsibilities, autonomy and power have increased (De Mas, 1990; Ar't Hamza, 1995; Fadlollah et al., 2000). However, such observations are mostly made "in passing" and tend to be based on assumption or moral prejudice rather than on systematic empirical inquiry.

The scarce literature on this issue is characterized by two major methodological flaws, which form obstacles to gaining a more systematic insight into this issue. First, there is the general lack of a comparative dimension. Migration impact studies tend to focus on migrants and their households or families and disregard non-migrants and their households. The inclusion of such a non-migrant control group is essential not only as a control group to assess migration impacts properly, but also because women and men belonging to non-migrant households are likely to be affected directly and indirectly by community-wide, migration-driven social and economic change. Another problem is that most migration impact studies have tended to focus solely on international migration, and largely ignore how internal migration might affect the position of women left behind in different ways from international migration.

The remainder of this paper aims to fill part of these gaps by studying the case of the Todgha oasis, a rural area located in the province of Ouarzazate in south-eastern Morocco. The aim of the paper is to assess how internal and international migration mainly of men has affected the daily activities of women left behind and their influence on household decision-making. This is based on an analysis of survey and qualitative data collected between 1999 and 2005. Qualitative data were collected in one oasis village through semistructured interviews and participatory research conducted in 1999. A total of 43 interviews were conducted with married women. Eleven women were married to internal migrants (who had left for other places in Morocco), 12 women were married to international migrants (all international migrants went to Europe) and 20 women were married to non-migrants (cf. Van Rooij, 2000). Survey data were collected among 507 non-migrant, internal and international migrant households comprising 3801 individuals, including 237 international (150 current and 87 returned) and 457 internal (292 current and 165 returned) migrants, in six different villages in the Todgha in 1998–2000. Additional open interviews were conducted in 2003 and 2005 among prospective migrants in the Todgha valley and households with recent, mostly irregular, migrants living in Spain and Italy, in order to gain insight into recent migration dynamics.

3. Migration and Women's Position in the Todgha Valley

The Todgha is a small river oasis located on the southern slopes of the High Atlas Mountains in Morocco. In 2004 the valley housed approximately 70 000 inhabitants living in 64 villages and the rapidly expanding town of Tinghir (25 000 inhabitants). Until French occupation of the valley in 1931, the Tamazight (Berber)-speaking oasis dwellers depended mainly on irrigated subsistence oasis agriculture.

From the late 19th century the population of this valley started to migrate to “French” Algeria. Since the 1960s, the Todghawi have participated on a massive scale in labour migration to France and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. Although migration was initially thought to be temporary, many migrants ended up settling in Europe. Initial labour migration by men was followed by family migration (through family reunification and new marriages between non-migrants and migrants) of women and children after the 1973 oil crisis. New, often irregular, labour migration to Spain and Italy has surged since the 1990s. Social networks and the persistent demand for migrant labour in Europe explain why out-migration from the Todgha over formally closed borders to Europe has been remarkably persistent. Almost all female migrants are family migrants. Owing to conservative social values on gender roles, women have generally not been allowed to migrate on their own. However, a small but growing number of young women started to migrate on their own to cities and, in some cases, abroad, to study or work in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Migration has become an all-pervasive phenomenon in the Todgha valley. Almost half of the surveyed active male population (16–65 years) has been, or still is, involved in internal (33%) or international (15%) migration. Taken together, 40.4% of all households participate in international migration and/or receive international remittances. A total of 25.0% of all surveyed households participate in internal migration, so that only 34.5% of all households can be classified as non-migrant.

Migration has coincided with a general diversification and de-agrarization of oasis livelihoods. The economy of the valley has been diversifying, with an increasing

concentration of social and economic activities in Tinghir, the valley's rapidly growing urban centre. Remittances and local, non-agrarian activities have become more important than agricultural income. Even among non-migrant households, 86.2% have local non-agrarian sources of income. Only 4.3% of all surveyed households rely exclusively on agriculture.

There is a positive and significant association between participation in international migration and household income. Mainly as a result of remittances, the average income of households directly involved in international migration is more than double that of non-migrant and internal migrant households. International migration households also enjoy much better living standards on average in terms of housing, sanitation, access to piped water, and so on. Internal migrant households earn only slightly higher average incomes than non-migrants, but the proportion of extremely poor households is far higher among non-migrants. This suggests that where international migration allows households to improve significantly their livelihoods, risk-spreading may be the primary motive behind internal migration (de Haas, 2006).

Traditionally, gender relations in rural Morocco in general are based on strong patriarchal principles, implying that men dominate household decision-making. This coincides with a tendency towards spatial separation, in which women's lives are largely restricted to the domestic domain, while the public domain is largely reserved for men. Nevertheless, the reality of life in rural Morocco has often deviated from this cultural-religious ideal. Social contacts between village men and women in the public space used to be rather common.

The preponderant role of women in sustaining rural households' livelihoods and child rearing is easily underestimated, because the gendered division of labour implies that women's labour is less visible and not financially remunerated. The typical household tasks of women living in oasis villages are: cleaning the house of dust and sand; the daily preparation of bread and cooking of lunch and dinner; washing clothes by hand; fetching and carrying water, which is a heavy task, especially when there is no private well in the family's courtyard; and taking care of the children. In a minority of households that do not yet use gas stoves, women have to walk several kilometres to fetch wood. The main male household task is purchasing food at the weekly market.

As in other Moroccan oases, women in the Todgha also have important agricultural tasks. There is a strict division between female and male agricultural tasks. Women harvest fruits and crops such as wheat and barley, and regularly walk to the small agricultural plots to cut alfalfa for the livestock, to weed, and to collect wood, leaves and twigs. The latter products are used to feed the livestock, heat the bread ovens and to braid baskets. Women also take care of the families' small livestock, traditionally consisting of several sheep, goats, a donkey and (for wealthy families only) one or two cows, and make products such as milk (butter) and wool. Typical male agricultural tasks are: ploughing, sowing, irrigating, the maintenance of irrigation infrastructure (e.g. dams, irrigation ditches), and climbing date palms to pollinate, cut old leaves and harvest dates.

Women usually work from dawn to dusk. They get up early and eat something (e.g. soup, dates) before they walk to the fields to harvest crops, collect dead palm leaves, and cut alfalfa and weeds for the livestock. Depending on the number of livestock and the number of fields, women go as often as every day or as little as once every other week. After carrying the agricultural produce home they feed and milk the animals. They then start to prepare breakfast (e.g. bread, olive oil, couscous, tea) for the other family members

who are getting up by that time. In families with more than one adult woman, these tasks are done in rotation.

After breakfast the women clean the houses, bake bread and prepare the warm lunch (e.g. tajin, a traditional Moroccan stew). In summer, when temperatures rise above 40°C, the whole family rests until 3 or 4 o'clock. After siesta, they might do the laundry by hand, either at the house or near an irrigation ditch with other women. If there are many crops in the fields, they go to the fields again to harvest alfalfa and other crops. Other late afternoon tasks may include churning milk to produce butter and buttermilk. If there is time left, women visit neighbours or family to drink tea, after which dinner is prepared. After dinner and tea at around 8 or 9 o'clock, most women go to bed.

Child rearing is also predominantly a woman's responsibility. In addition, in important affairs for which the father's approval is mandatory (e.g. school, work, marriage), negotiations with the father usually take place indirectly, via the mother. Breast-fed babies are usually carried on the back in a large cloth if women go to the fields or work at home. Older sisters or other women in the household often take care of toddlers. From the age of 6–7 years, girls usually start helping their mother in the household. From the age of 11–12 years, this becomes mandatory. Sometimes the women negotiate with a daughter about household chores, but these chores are usually already decided by the mother or, if she lives in an extended household, by her older female in-laws. With increasing school attendance of girls, their participation in household work is decreasing, although they are generally expected to help in after-school hours.

According to local customary law, and in contrast to shari'a (Islamic law), women are not entitled to inherit. Both customary and Moroccan state law nominally allow men to marry up to four women (although this has largely remained a privilege of the rich and recent law changes have made polygamous marriage difficult) and render divorce much more difficult for women than for men. Until recently, most girls were given in marriage when they were between 13 and 18 years of age. In general, women are placed under the guardianship of their father or, when married, their husbands and their family-in-law, and are expected to obey male household members. Only when a woman has given birth to several children (preferably sons) and reaches a "respectable" age does her say in household affairs tend to increase.

Gender inequality is manifested further by the fact that, at least until very recently, only men were allowed to migrate on their own. If the migrant was married, the honour of the family and, in particular, the chastity of his wife and daughters who were left behind used to be guarded by the migrant's extended family household. In this perspective, remittances, which are destined for the entire extended family household, can be considered as the price that the migrant pays for this (cf. De Mas, 1990, p. 83). Thanks to this system, men have traditionally been able to participate in circular migration without jeopardizing the family's honour.

4. General Trends in Gender Inequality

Women tend to marry at a much younger age than men. The average age at which the women interviewed, whose age at interview was 37 on average, had married was 15. Among 30-year-olds, 90% of women are or were married, compared with 50% among men (see Figure 1). However, owing to the influence of new legal restrictions on early marriage, modernist Islam, education and generally changing norms, most young people

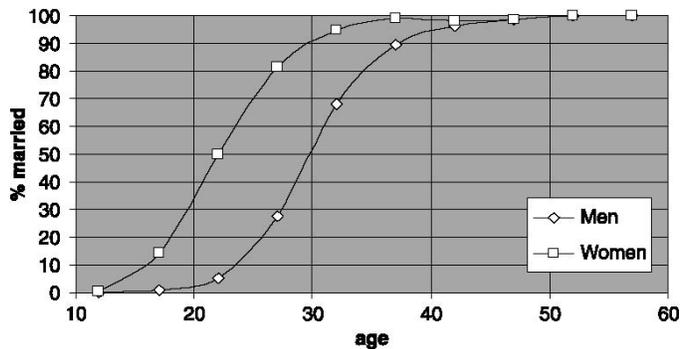


Figure 1. Proportion of men and women who are or were married, by 5-year age group. Source: Household survey.

now reject arranged, early marriages, and women tend to marry later. Hence, only 2.4% of the 15-year-old girls included in the household survey were married. It is likely that this share has decreased further in the last decade in parallel with the overall increasing age of first marriage in Morocco, a process that has possibly been reinforced by the adoption of a new Moudawana (the Moroccan Civil Status Code) in 2004, which substantially increased women's rights and restricted marriage under the age of 18.

Moreover, there is growing awareness among parents that forced or arranged (premature) marriages tend to lead to divorce, which has become an increasingly common phenomenon. Within the survey sample, 8.0% of women in the 20–24 age group were divorced. The divorce rates were 14.9, 14.3, 11.8 and 7.3% for the 25–29, 30–34, 35–39 and 40–44 age groups, respectively. For men, these rates were 0.3, 0, 1.2, 6.6, 3.1 and 4.8%, respectively.

All older women (above 35–40 years) interviewed claimed that their marriages were strictly their parents' decisions and that they hardly knew their husbands before marriage. Most young women claimed that they had chosen their marriage partner, although often in negotiation with their parents. They are now generally allowed to meet their future husband several times before marriage.

For girls and their mothers, education is today a socially acceptable reason to postpone marriage. Their daughters' education was a priority for all respondents below 40. Women who kept—particularly their eldest—daughters at home and did not allow them to go to school were all above 40. In addition, the growing influence of official, modernist Islam as propagated by the Moroccan state to the detriment of popular Islam seems to have a positive rather than negative effect on girls' education. Education of both men and women is an important virtue in modernist Islam, whereas traditional norms reject girls' education.

Thus, prolonged education and changing norms concerning marriage seem to reinforce each other. This corroborates evidence that girls increasingly attend school. Figure 2 shows that, over the past 50 years, there has been a truly dramatic increase in primary school attendance, which has now become almost universal. The dramatic increase happened first for men. Among the 35–39-year-old women, more than 90% had never attended school, against less than 20% among men. Over the last generation, this gender

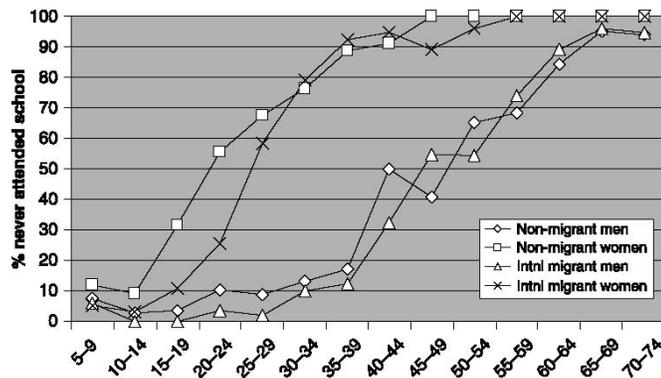


Figure 2. Proportion of men and women who have never attended primary school (at least for 1 year), by age and international migration participation of their household. Source: Household survey.

gap in primary education has rapidly closed. This is likely to presage a similar development in secondary education, where boys still predominate.

Figure 2 shows that the dramatic improvement in schooling levels of boys and, in particular, girls, is a general development in the first place. Besides the influence of gradually shifting norms vis-à-vis female education, their increasing participation in education is facilitated by the recent extension of schools throughout the valley. Proximity of schools is particularly important for girls, as in many parts of the valley they are not allowed to walk long distances through the fields to school. Figure 2 also suggests that the increase has been slightly faster in households that participate in international migration. This might indicate that migration has played a positive, accelerating role in closing the gender gap in primary education. This can be explained by the fact that international migrant households enjoy relatively high and stable remittance incomes. Furthermore, many such households are de facto female headed, which might give women a greater say in decisions on their daughters' education.

Age differentials between male and female spouses can be seen as another dimension of overall gender inequality. Table 1 indicates that the age differential between spouses is much lower for younger generations. Among households where the head is above 59 years, male spouses were 14 years older on average than their female spouses. For heads younger than 45 years, this differential was only 7 years. There was a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.391^{**}$) between the age of the household head and the age differential between the (male) head and his spouse. Comparing households with and without access to international migration, and when controlling for age, no significant differences were found. Therefore, international migration participation apparently does not play a significant role in explaining this decrease, and declining age differentials between spouses seem rather part of a general trend.

Birth rates in the Todgha are declining fast, reflecting the rapid demographic transition Morocco is going through. Moroccan population growth reached a peak in 1965 and then started to decline, mainly because of a steep decrease in fertility rates from 6.89 in 1972 to 2.75 in 2002 and 2.50 in 2003/4. Although, according to the 2004 census, fertility levels

Table 1. Age differential between spouses by migration participation and age household head

Age household head	Age differential spouses (%)							
	Household Migration status	< 7	7-11	≥ 12	Total	Mean	N	Contingency Coefficient ¹
< 45	Nonmigrant	54.4	32.2	13.3	100.0	6.7	90	0.100 ^x
	International migr.	44.8	34.5	20.7	100.0	8.1	29	
	Total	52.1	32.8	15.1	100.0	7.0	119	
45-59	Nonmigrant	31.2	35.1	33.8	100.0	10.8	77	0.117 ^x
	International migr.	29.9	45.5	24.7	100.0	9.3	77	
	Total	30.5	40.3	29.2	100.0	10.0	154	
≥ 60	Nonmigrant	19.5	39.0	41.6	100.0	12.6	77	0.099 ^x
	International migr.	17.5	31.3	51.3	100.0	14.9	80	
	Total	18.5	35.0	46.5	100.0	13.7	157	

Source: Household survey

¹ The “x” sign indicates a non-significant (at 5 % level) association between age differential and household participation in international migration.

Table 2. School enrolment and age of marriage, by village

Village	Girls' school enrolment 7-12	Girls' school enrolment 13-18	% 15-19 women married	% 20-24 women married
1	92.8	47.6	0.0	39.7
2	95.7	47.1	12.8	55.0
3	92.1	34.2	6.3	52.4
4	82.5	21.6	10.8	64.3
5	76.4	4.5	39.0	49.0
6	81.8	58.3	12.5	50.0
Total	87.7	31.0	14.5	49.8

Source: Household survey

are still about one child higher in rural (3.1) than in urban areas (2.1), the declining trend is universal. Female education is the prime explanatory factor behind such decreases, but this is part of a broader modernization process affecting fertility, family planning, contraceptive use, and the role and status of women in the family as well as in society (D'Addato, 2006). In addition, the Moroccan government has actively promoted family planning through information campaigns and the provision of contraceptives.

This is consistent with 1994 and 2004 census data. Besides showing a spectacular plunge in overall fertility levels, these indicate that fertility rates are much higher in the rural municipalities with the lowest levels of school enrolment (decreasing from 5.3 to 2.9 between 1994 and 2004) and lowest in the urbanized, municipalities with high schooling levels (decreasing from 3.5 to 1.8, below replacement level, between 1994 and 2004) (source: Haut Commissariat du Plan). Although we cannot derive fertility rates from the survey data, several indicators suggest that there is a relationship between age of marriage, fertility levels and girls' schooling. In village 5, which is the most traditional village of the sample, it was only recently that primary education for girls became acceptable, while secondary education was still taboo (see Table 2). This was also the research village where 39% of the 15–19-year-old girls were married.

This suggests that substantial changes in the position of women in the Todgha, as indicated by a later age of marriage, improving education and declining fertility are primarily the result of a general process of change rather than the particular effect of migration. Nevertheless, as we shall see, social and financial remittances generated by migration might have played a certain accelerating and indirect role in these processes.

5. Migration, Female-headed Households and the Nucleation of Family Life

In rural Morocco, out-migration of men tended to have negative consequences for the autonomy of spouses left behind if they followed the traditional pattern of continuing to live within the extended family households of their in-laws. While they tended to bear major responsibilities in child bearing and rearing, housekeeping and agricultural production during the absence of their spouses, they were also expected to obey their in-laws, their mother-in-law in particular. In extended family households, remittances are rarely sent directly to the migrant's wife, but to one of the men in the household, such as the father-in-law or a brother-in-law. This situation has tended to generate frequent conflicts between migrant wives and their family-in-law, especially on the expenditure

of remittances. Avoiding such conflicts as well as the pressure to share remittance wealth among many family members seems to have stimulated the “lifting out” of nuclear migrant families from extended households.

Such family nucleation happens through family reunification at the migration destination, through the construction of a separate house for the nuclear family in the village, or through the relocation of the entire nuclear family from the village to Tinghir, or other towns and cities in Morocco. Only 18% of all surveyed households were still of the extended type. Such processes have been described for several emigration regions in Morocco (cf. Hajjarabi, 1988; De Mas, 1990). It is important to emphasize that the nucleation of family life is part of a general process of change in Morocco, in which birth rates have fallen rapidly and nuclear households have become the norm over recent decades. However, migration-related tensions between migrants’ wives and their in-laws have probably played an accelerating role in this process.

More and more households in the Todgha are headed by women. A total of 10.4% of all surveyed households were female-headed according to the respondents themselves. Besides increased divorce rates (see above), migration is generally seen as a major cause of the increasing number of female-headed households in Morocco (Fadloulah et al., 2000, p. 130). This is apparently contradicted by our survey data showing that 14.8% of non-migrant households were female-headed, against 13.5% among internal migrant households and only 1% among international migration households. However, this largely reflected the higher occurrence of divorce among younger women. Non-migrant households are generally in an early phase of their household lifecycle as opposed to comparatively “mature” international migration households—and divorce is less common among older generations.

The majority of internal and international migrant households are de facto female households. Although it is generally the oldest remaining man (e.g. son) in the household who is identified by other household members, including women, as the official replacement of the migrated spouse, it is generally the migrant’s wife who tends to bear the actual responsibility. This is certainly the case if the household is nuclear and the children relatively young. Respectively, 72.2 and 58.8% of the internal and international migrant households were nuclear and can therefore generally be considered as de facto female-headed. Together, they represented 29.9% of all surveyed households. If we add to this the female-headed non-migrant households, representing 6.9% of the total population, we estimate that over one-third of all surveyed households were de facto female-headed.

There was a major difference in terms of material security and wealth between internal and international migrant households. Wives of internal migrants—who generally have only temporary and badly paid jobs in cities—tended to live materially insecure lives and often had to deal with low and irregular remittance transfers. Wives of international migrants living in Europe tended to receive regular and much higher remittance transfers and lived in larger and more comfortable houses.

6. Changes in Women’s Household Tasks and Workload

Although there has been a general decrease in women’s workloads and an overall increase in their material well-being over recent decades, there is a high degree of differentiation, depending mainly on households’ migration status. Non-migrant wives of internal migrants tend to have heavier workloads than wives of non-migrants, and the wives

of international migrants tend to have the lowest workloads. The interview data indicate that the household workload of women living in nuclear households did not significantly increase as a consequence of migration. After all, women were already responsible for all domestic and many agricultural tasks before the migration of their husbands. There is no evidence that women have taken over traditionally male agricultural tasks as a consequence of migration. Hence, for typical “male” agricultural tasks—such as ploughing, sowing and irrigation—migrant households are obliged to hire wage labourers if there are no men around who can or want to pursue these tasks, at least if they can afford this.

As international migration households tend to be at a more advanced stage of their household life cycle, there are generally more adolescent or adult women around to share tasks. Moreover, remittance-receiving international migrant households can afford to employ non-migrant women for domestic tasks and they can afford to pay agricultural labourers. Some women claim that, with their husbands away, they can plan their own time, which they experience as an advantage in addition to the fact that there is at least one person less (the migrated husband) to take care of. This has in many cases even decreased their workloads.

The opposite was often true for women living in much poorer internal migrant households. As they have fewer financial resources to hire labourers, and they tend to live in small nuclear households with young children, they generally have the most arduous workload.³ Thus, whereas remittance counterflows generally enabled international migration households to (more than) compensate for the “lost labour effect” by engaging personnel—thereby easing the life of migrants’ wives—internal migrant households were generally not, or only partially, able to do so.

All female respondents, whether living in migrant or non-migrant households, agreed that their life was easier than that of their mothers, and countered views that life was better before. This can be partly attributed to recent technological advances, such as the advent of gas stoves, private water wells and water pumps. Other factors that have eased the burden of women in their own eyes are the decreasing birth rates and the fact that most women now buy leather, fabrics and clothes at the market, instead of manufacturing them themselves as their mothers used to do. Before the arrival of piped water, fetching water from public wells was a heavy burden. Many women also point to the large extended families their mothers had to take care of.

New, more spacious and often concrete houses are easier to clean and often contain lavatories. It is particularly households involved in international migration that enjoy such facilities, thanks to remittances. Wives of non-migrants or internal migrants generally lived in more difficult conditions. For instance, 74% of households of returned international migrants live in a concrete house and 94% have a lavatory in their house, compared with 36 and 57% among non-migrant and internal migrant households, respectively.

All female respondents—both living in migrant and in non-migrant households—see education as a huge improvement to their daughters’ lives. All respondents regretted not having attended school themselves, and attached high priority to their children attending school. They felt education was very important and most husbands agreed on this matter. Yet the primary value attached to education differed for boys and girls. While the interviewed women saw education as important for boys primarily in order to get a job, the importance of education for girls was primarily seen in the context of their position

in family life. The women perceived that education made them less dependent on others (e.g. to read documents, to write and send letters) and, in their own words, “better prepared for marriage” with regards to physical maturity (because schooling is a socially acceptable way to postpone marriage), knowledge and assertiveness. Schooling is perceived as increasing the capabilities of women to gain control over their own lives. Mothers and daughters perceived education as a good strategy and socially acceptable justification for preventing marriage at an early age. For the girls themselves, going to school was an acceptable justification for not being involved in housekeeping all day long.

Although the wish to send daughters to primary school has become universal and is in fact turning into a new social norm, this wish is easier to fulfil for women living in international migration households, because they are considerably wealthier and perhaps also because wives of international migrants have more influence on household decision-making. In the case of poorer non-migrant and internal migrant households, when there are money problems or the women need help at home and cannot afford to hire labourers, it is the girls who are kept at home first, because boys’ education is ultimately seen as more important for the households’ future economic survival.

When asked about their daughters’ future, all respondents obviously wished their daughters a better life than they themselves had had. In order to achieve this, most mothers wanted their daughter to have a life outside the Todgha, in cities or in Europe, “so that they will not have to work in the fields”, as one respondent put it. Interestingly, the wives of migrants more often wanted their daughters to leave the oasis than the wives of non-migrants. Most thought that this objective was most easily realized through marriage with a migrated and preferably wealthy man. A minority also envisaged a professional future for their daughter, for example as a schoolteacher outside the oasis. In general, the younger and the better educated the mothers were, the higher their ambitions for their daughters. In particular the wives of internal migrants, who are predominantly young and sometimes attended school for a number of years themselves, wanted their daughters to finish their studies and obtain a professional qualification. This corroborates earlier observations that there is an intergenerational tendency towards better participation in education for girls. This seems a function of their age rather than of their migratory background per se, although education of young household members seems to be positively influenced by participation in international migration of other household members.

7. Women’s Responsibilities and their Role in Household Decision-making

All women living in migrant households experienced an increase in responsibilities as a consequence of migration. While the absence of their husband may effectively decrease their workload—especially in international migration households—they also have to take over most of the husbands’ responsibilities. This was felt to be the biggest change caused by the migration of their husbands, as they became responsible for managing almost all household affairs. They generally experienced this doubling in responsibilities as a burden and a source of social and psychological stress. Although some wives whose spouses migrated abroad pointed to the advantages of their husbands’ absence, wives of internal migrants only emphasized the burden of his absence. Again, this can be linked to age and household life cycle-related factors. On average the interior migrant wives are younger and therefore have fewer grown-up or adolescent children to support them in tasks and decisions.

Women living in nuclear migrant households tend to have more control over the use of their husbands' earnings than wives living in non-migrant households. Almost all migrants' wives decided independently what to do with the remittances sent home by their husbands, and had control over most day-to-day spending and smaller investments. The only exception to this rule were two women still living in traditional extended households, where older or male family members took the main decisions on the household budget. Compared with non-migrant wives, migrant wives decided relatively independently what crops to grow and what purchases to make. They also tended to have more influence on the schooling of their children, including that of their daughters. As mentioned before, this might partly explain why girls in international migrant households attended school more often than girls in non-migrant households. Migrant wives were also responsible for hiring personnel and sending people to go to the market for them. In general, migrant wives consulted their absent husbands only on major issues such as the renovation of the house or the purchase or sale of animals.

In both internal and international migrant households, the absence of their husbands gave women more decision-making authority, especially when they lived in nuclear households. However, a key observation is that this gain in authority is mainly temporary, as migrants take over their position as "patriarchs" as soon as they return. It is particularly striking that the vast majority of migrant women saw this (temporary) increase in responsibilities and decision-making power as a burden. They typically stated that it is "not the right position" for a woman, often because they were afraid that they would be criticized by community members for their "manly" behaviour. The respondents considered prevailing role patterns as "natural", and most said that they were not prepared to bear the responsibility for decision-making and play the role of household head. Migrant wives tended to complain that they had to carry all the weight of the responsibilities, and therefore preferred their husbands to be at home.

Only a minority would prefer that their husbands stay away. By contrast, non-migrants' wives often wanted their men to leave. The perceived material advantages of migration typically coexisted with a fear of being left alone. One woman voiced this ambiguous position as follows:

We want our husbands to be at home because we find it difficult without them and they [non-migrant wives] want their husband to migrate because there are always relational problems in marriages and they need the money.

Besides the perceived burden of carrying double ("male" and "female") responsibilities and the social and psychological stress this might involve, many wives—first and foremost—just missed the company of their husbands. Although obviously depending on the quality of marital relationships, the emotional seclusion, the long periods of sexual abstinence and the material dependence on their spouses complicated life for migrant women. The position of migrant wives can also become vulnerable, dependent as they are on remittance transfers, and because they sometimes live in fear of being repudiated by their absent spouses.

Nevertheless, despite all the difficulties, most wives of international migrants claimed that, on the whole, they lived in better circumstances. As one respondent stated:

We have better houses and more money than other women. It is good for the men themselves to have a job somewhere but it is difficult for us, women, to live without

our husbands. We have all the responsibilities. But, despite the difficulties, it is certainly better to be a migrant wife because of the money.

Based on her own fieldwork in the Todgha, Steinmann (1993, p. 122) argued that the increasing emphasis on a capital-based economy adversely affects all women. Women in migrant households are more dependent on their husband's remittances, while women in non-migrant households are also increasingly dependent on their husband's income, which is often barely sufficient to meet the household's needs. Although this might be true to a certain extent, it is probably not right to claim that women's task loads have generally increased. They seem to have decreased instead. In addition, there have been undeniable improvements in education, fertility and age of marriage, as well as in the general living conditions of women and other family members.

Of all women, wives of internal migrants tended to have the most arduous lives in material and physical terms. They tended to live in financial insecurity and often lacked grown-up children to support them in household tasks and decision-making owing to their generally young age. Wives of international migrants often had grown-up children, were considerably wealthier and lived in better conditions as regards housing and sanitation and could afford to engage personnel to carry out certain domestic or agricultural tasks. This purchasing power had great advantages. For instance, internal migrant households were sometimes forced to sell sheep, goats and cows in bad harvest years or when they faced other economic adversity, whereas international migrant households could compensate for the lack of their own fodder by buying it. Remittances provided them with more options than just selling or eating the animals.

Moreover, wives of international migrants often gained in power and status vis-à-vis the wives of non-migrants or internal migrants. Within a kind of patron-client relationship, the latter two categories of women tended to perform domestic and agricultural tasks for international migrant wives in exchange for vegetables, meat, or some financial compensation. This "payment" was generally not fixed beforehand, and depended on the benevolence of the patrons. Poor women have an interest in working for international migrant wives, as this gives them the moral right to make an appeal to their patrons in times of economic hardship, if, for instance they do not have enough money to buy food. Thus, working for international migrant women is a kind of insurance against crises and a way to create a fallback position. Hence, this relationship is not necessarily warm-hearted. International migrant wives tend to feel superior to other women, who in their turn tend to complain about their arrogant attitude.

Almost all interviewed women claimed that they "agree" with their husbands' migration, but some women indicated they actually "have no choice but to agree". This reveals an interesting ambiguity. In Sen's (1999) terms, one could say that women are largely "unfree" and have only limited power to influence decisions on issues such as the migration of their husbands, let alone their own migration. This exemplifies the limitations of household approaches, which tend to obscure such intra-household gender inequalities.

Almost all wives of international migrants expected and wished to follow their husbands through family reunification. They clearly wished to do so not only to be reunited with their husbands, but also because they thought that migrating abroad would increase their freedom both in legal and in material terms. Wives of internal migrants often did not see this as a realistic possibility because of the lack of stable and remunerative employment for their husbands at the destination.

8. Conclusion: Migration as Emancipation?

There have been dramatic changes in the life of women (and men) living in the Todgha in terms of access to education, marriage and fertility levels. However, such changes have primarily been part of general processes of social, cultural and economic change. This demonstrates that it would be misleading to study “migration impacts” without embedding the analysis into the context of broader societal transformation processes, of which migration is an integral part. Only in this way can we try to disentangle migration impacts as far as possible from more general processes of change.

Although women tend to live better and more independent lives than before, we have seen that internal and international migration has generally not played a major and independent role in this change, as has sometimes been suggested in the literature. Although the absence of men has implied a considerable increase in the responsibilities and decision-making power among the wives of both internal and international migrants, this has mainly been a temporary change, as most men assume their traditional, patriarchal roles as soon as they return. Thus, the migration of men does not directly lead to a permanent change in the position of women from the restrictions of their traditionally defined roles. Nevertheless, in more indirect ways and in the longer term, migration might enhance women’s position through its positive effects on girls’ education and the possible (but less tangible and yet to be analysed further) function of female (family) migrants and the generally well-educated and relatively independent “second generation” women living in Europe as role models while they visit the Todgha during holidays. Such “social remittances” generated by international migration and the subsequent exposure to modern norms and values surrounding marriage and child rearing might indeed have accelerated the spread of European marriage patterns and small family norms as suggested by Courbage (1996) and Fargues (2006), and accelerated the closing of the gender gap in education.

A crucial question is why most women left behind by their migrated husbands actually consider their temporarily more responsible and powerful position a burden, as this runs counter to intuitive expectations that they would enjoy it. What plays an important role is the general fear of social criticism and scandal mongering. Such criticism might endanger their respectability and, hence, their social security. In Moroccan rural society, breaking the rules too overtly may well lead to social exclusion, the consequences of which can be disastrous in times of economic hardship. Gossip, in particular, is a powerful social instrument that prevents villagers from breaking too overtly with the prevailing cultural norms on gender roles. The widespread fear of gossiping prevails in all the research villages and maintaining the good name of the family preoccupies the minds of villagers in social interaction.

In this context, Kandiyoti (1988) argued that in order to avoid overt rule-breaking while improving their own situations, women engage in various strategies to maximize security and optimize life options within the given set of concrete social, economic and cultural constraints. Kandiyoti used the concept of “patriarchal bargain” to indicate how the constraints of “patriarchy” limit the negotiation capacity of women as well as explain the “passive” or tacit, covert character of their resistance to male domination in their own households and the wider community. She argued that by allowing men to enjoy some privileges, women guarantee for themselves more protection and security. Women may therefore actually cling to patriarchal principles, as they also seem to do in the Todgha, as they have no alternatives in a patriarchal society for securing their situation.

Long-distance migration has created a quite sudden, dramatic and unintended shift in the responsibilities and tasks of women, which they do not consider rightfully theirs within the normative context of “traditional” society, and to which they do not always aspire. Within less than one generation, these women have been confronted with a radical change in social, economic, educational and symbolic functions for which they were not prepared. In a sociological context that is not favourably disposed and can even be hostile towards this change, the more or less forced adaptation of new roles can be painful. Women may therefore defy complex emancipation processes and fear a new status that they have not chosen. In her study on women and social change in the Moroccan Rif, Hajjarabi (1995, pp. 106–107) came to similar conclusions.

This explains why the women themselves generally do not tend to view this temporary change (which a naïve outsider might easily misunderstand as “emancipation”) as a positive experience. Women have been pushed to assume responsibility for entire families, and to intervene in domains and processes that were not formerly in their sphere of influence. As this new role is generally not assumed out of free choice, it should not automatically be equated with “emancipation” in the meaning of making independent and conscious choices against prevailing norms on gender roles.

It seems that migration itself has only limited direct influence on such norms, and that the real improvements in the position of women (e.g. better education, later age of marriage, more freedom in partner choice, lower fertility and the beginning of participation in labour migration) reflect general processes of change within Moroccan society rather than being particular effects of migration. Generally, it is difficult to disentangle migration impacts and more general transformation processes. Migration is an integral part of such processes, rather than an exogenous variable “impacting” on such changes.

In spite of the social difficulties of deviating from their traditional role, women in the Todgha generally realize that they are in a disadvantaged position. Television and education confronts them with modern (Western and Islamic) ideas on the role of women. They therefore hope that their daughters will enjoy more freedom than they themselves have had. They therefore encourage their daughters’ schooling—as they see this as an effective way to be better prepared for marriage and sometimes also to obtain an independent income—and many hope that they will be able to build better futures by migrating elsewhere. The dream of many young women in the Todgha is to marry an international migrant, not only in order to achieve wealthier and more stable livelihoods, but also to break away from the constraints that traditional rural society imposes on women.

An increasing number of young women aspire to migrate independently in order to study or work elsewhere, often preferably on the other side of the Strait of Gibraltar. Until very recently, most Moroccan women who went independently to study or work in France, Spain, Italy, Canada, or elsewhere, tended to be from a middle-class, urban background. In recent years, women from predominantly rural areas such as the Todgha have also started to emigrate outside the context of family migration. Seeing and meeting better-educated, working, and more independent female migrants not only makes them more aware of other lifestyles, but also makes them realize that their aspirations can potentially be fulfilled, and that another, in their eyes better and fulfilling, life is in fact possible. Indeed, a “culture of migration” has clearly pervaded women’s lives as well.

Notes

¹ When asked, and in line with prevailing social norms, most women identify a (present or absent) male family member as the household head. However, such households can be classified as de facto female-headed if women are responsible for day-to-day household management and take most important decisions.

² There are also international migrant households that predominantly contain young children. This is especially common among migrants who have left for Spain and Italy since the 1990s and who are still in the early stages of their family life cycle. Especially when these migrants live “illegally” in Europe, the lives of their wives are difficult and uncertain, and their husbands are also unable to return regularly.

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