



**Women and Gender Defiance during Covid 19  
in Morocco Cooperative of  
“Femme des Roses” as a case study**

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**Abstract:**

The fact that Morocco has succeeded in the ongoing era to implement several legal advancements especially in women’s rights namely gender parity in constitutional and family laws allowed it to solidify its international liability. Yet the problem of setting these regulations into motion makes the latter suffer from legislative loopholes because of persistent cultural, social, economic and educational barriers that deprive women of achieving tangible rights. However, despite these multifarious impediments, women in Morocco do not drop their hands and surrender to the dictated and fatalist situations but they do their best to improve progressively the social empowerment chiefly in the moments of crisis. This paper is an attempt to outline the omnipresence of women in facing fatal calamities be they social, cultural, economic or political. The core focus, therefore, will concentrate on the period of Covid 19 as this pandemic lockdown engender ample problems for the fair sex in Morocco. The paper will revolve around women cooperative “Femme de Rose” as a case study.

**Key words:** Morocco, women, gender parity, empowerment, crisis and challenges.



## **Introduction**

November 2019 has been a remarkable date that scarred intensely the history of the contemporary era and destabilized the world at large with the unpredictable emergence of the Covid 19, a phenomenon that disrupted violently the harmony of the educational, social, political and economic mechanism flow. It is undeniably true that there was no sector that remains intactly unscathed from the impactful effect of this lethal disease that seems to drive the world to a stand-still and diametrically frozen state. The occasioned repercussions of Covid 19, nevertheless, seem to be approximately equally experienced worldwide with some insignificant exceptions that tinged some areas of the globe.

However, if the aftermaths are relatively levelled among nations, the social sectors, especially the issue of gender role, women, be they housewives or practicing a career, were the social strata that were mostly incur the multifarious burdens of this disease both in their domestic life and their workplaces.

Women in Morocco becomes the epicenter of daily incurred problems and incessantly intricate and impenetrable difficulties. According to a large number of phone call that I share with my female friends, none of them expresses her satisfaction and well-being along the days of the pandemic, complainingly protesting out heartedly that they were facing extra housework and family duties of different types. The stay-at-home orders jeopardize the condition of women and put on their shoulder additional hard tasks. Believing that women are adept at crisis management, they assume the responsibility of reminding the household of wearing masks in and out of home and taking care of washing them every day, advising her children of using soap, cleaning and sweeping the floor whenever a new comer steps in; these are some of the incessant procedures that women are encumbered with along the period of coronavirus. In the same way, women with a career express their lamentable situations in the workplaces, regretting the bad decision of joining the job market as they were the targeted staff that the companies are liable to fire out. However, Jennifer M. Piscopo & Malliga Och (2021) prove the contrary, affirming that “Early media coverage hailed women leaders as the heroes of the pandemic, proclaiming that women-led countries had better COVID-19 public health outcomes than men-led countries.” p. 5. If the citation focuses primarily on the health sector where women outperformed their male counterparts in performing abilities, women also justify their indomitable decisions in other areas. Therefore, “Women confront gendered barriers that may shape their roles, their opportunities, and their receptions.” (Ibid. p. 4). They were accused for failing to turn whatever predictable or unpredictable crisis around.

The situation of women, either at home or at workplace, is practically tinged with vulnerability, which makes them a victimized category in the social context. They met various challenges posed by the coronavirus and unfortunate the same state has been prolonged during normal times. This undemocratic status quo of women gives rise to endless questions regarding the mobilization of fair or rather



legal procedures to hopefully extricate them from the besmirched environment in which they are allegedly condemned to shelter.

This introduction reflects broadly on the condition of women worldwide, since most media coverage tenaciously captured the unfair and discriminating role ascribed to women during and even after the period of pandemic. In this respect, after tackling, though laconically, how women are dealt with and how they were conceptualized and evaluated in the eyes of their male counterparts, I will pivot to the core issue of this presentation in the attempt to uncover the issue of the gender role and how it is conceived in some areas of Morocco. This paper, therefore, is supposed to reduce the scope of focus dealing, in the first place, with the situation of Moroccan women and more precisely with the cooperative of **Natural Products** in the region of Qalaat Maggouna.

### **Defining gender studies**

Before embarking on analyzing the question of the gender role in these particular women cooperative per se, I deem it better to shed light on the matter of gender studies revolving around its main historical background together with its main objectives.

In the broad sense of the issue, gender studies are conceived as an interdisciplinary field that investigates the problematic interaction of the gender with other related concepts chiefly race, sexuality, ethnicity, class to name but a few identity markers. Gender studies targets how gender has a certain impact the societal environment in defining the class structure relationship and cultural responses.

For the sake of uncovering the blurred view of the term sex and the one of gender, the former has a biological and psychological dimension and characteristics that distinguish a man from a woman, while the latter deals with the socially constructed roles, the practices activities, the performed conducts and ascribed attributes that a social group associates with males and females. Put differently, gender studies premise that masculinity and femininity is the product as well as the construct of society. In this regard, gender refers primarily to culturally constructed roles that idiosyncratically either ascribed to males or females and reveals how the structural relationships of disparity is displayed between the two sides.

Academically, gender studies examine the way through which the social norms and the societal structure are dealt with in terms of masculinity and femininity, in the sense that it deciphers and decodes the traits that qualify either males or females and how these

features impact their position in the realm of society. Such a view originates what is termed gender relations where a social group determines, sometimes categorically by some patriarchal societies, the roles of males and females and



considers it a red line that cannot be encroached upon by any side of them.

Gender studies become the core interest of different trends mainly feminism that uncover the question of femininity and that of masculinity which entails in the establishment of women empowerment. Women aspire and finally gain what is called equity and equality in gender relations through the process of empowerment, which means an egalitarian process of sharing power in the broad sense of the word, ranging from social, educational, political and economic ones.

Before developing the situation of the Moroccan women along Covid 19, it is also crucial to have at least a laconic view of how women in the globe are impacted by this lethal and intimidatingly devastating disease that seems to exacerbate the condition of the fair sex. Both governmental decision makers or non-governmental associations stress and at the same warn about the gender divide that tend to victimize women more than they do for men. Brechenmacher and Hubbard (2020) have delineated the pandemic encumbered women with supplementary housework in addition to the dwindling of their financial independence through losing their part-time or full-time jobs. In the same vein, Sharafeldine (2020) argued that the pandemic becomes the core of domestic problem in which women constitute the ineluctable fatalities. Besides shouldering much of the load of the domestic tasks, women also are exposed to the risk of losing their jobs as the rate of job firing is higher for females than that of men which shows that women are serving in the frontlines against the crisis triggered by Covid 19 as it is reported that 70% of the workforce in healthcare are women. This witnesses that women constitute the mainstay and backbone role energetically manifested in the moments of crisis.

The government has taken some economic and social measures to ease off at least temporarily the financial and societal disruptions; women, notwithstanding, represent the victimized category in these dealings as they were disproportionately rewarded or at least fairly paid.

### **Challenges that face women in the cooperative**

This paper is an attempt to outline the situation of female workers of this cooperative which is ran by a group of women. The study will be tackled and approached through the lenses of gender studies in the of highlighting how women faces social and economic intricate crises namely in the pandemic period. It investigates to what extent women in the region of Qalaat Maggouna seek to concretize their empowerment in the hope of establishing a sense of equity and equality. Along the same vein of arguments, women's empowerment is traced back to the first movement of women's emancipation aspires to share power with the confidence to share power with their counterpart men. Women, or fair sex as they are mostly labelled and categorized, besides meeting the criteria of some idiosyncrasies chiefly tenderness, sensitivity, affection, kindheartedness, among other similar epithets, are also aspiring to concretize both their physical and



intellectual potentials in different sectors which are supposed to be monopolized by males such as companies, schools and cooperatives.

This transition of empowerment will be highlighted against the background of a one-hundred women management cooperative. The choice of this cooperative will serve to examine to what extent women are supposed to translate their charisma, proficiency and competence into tangibly existing scheme more particularly at the time crisis. The best example that the globe has frightfully experienced for two long years is the emergence of Covid 19 and the drastic repercussions that traced all sectors with deep scars. The cooperative of “*نساء الورد*” *Femme des Roses*”, administered especially by women, does not constitute an exception, but it has undertaken uphill tasks to withstand and resist against the intricate social and economic challenges.

This paper is based on a fieldwork that I have undertaken on February, 2024; it includes face-to-face interviews, online WhatsApp discussions and the use of Zoom application. The main objective of this field work is to obtain firsthand information and to grasp the women’s opinion and perception of the economic and social problems they face in the pandemic and the emergent measures they took to overcome these challenges. With tight-lipped complexion and high-pitched tone, some interviewees vociferated their assorted estimations of their project, varying between the present intricate difficulties of the days of Corona virus and the hopeful aspiration with which they are equipped to defy the underway challenging predicaments.

The discussion revolves primary around three central issues: the problem of the staff constituted one-hundred per cent of women, administrative regulations and the problem of the quality of the products. This paper, therefore, will be subdivide into three main sections, **ranging from the general view of society that women are allegedly conceived as vulnerable beings, the hindrances of the administrative procedures (taxes, regulations, fundings) and the cost of keeping the same rate of providing a good quality of the products.** These sections are structurally interconnected and complementary in their essence as each section organically constitutes an ineluctable part of the whole system of the cooperative.

To contextualize the abovementioned cooperative, it is geographically located in the suburbs of Qalaat Maggouna’s town in the Mid-south of Morocco; it is a region which famous for its handicraft, wonderful oases and natural agricultural products. Socially, the region is governed by an inveterate patriarchal culture that divests women from sorts of empowerments. However, despite these culturally based hindrances, women manage to fight back the forced legacy of the forefathers and hence succeed to curb the male- monopolized economic sector. To achieve certain financial independence in this rather secluded and poor region where public job opportunities seem unreachable especially for women, the latter direct their attention to an accessibly manageable occupations by creating



cooperatives as an alternative to achieve financial independence. In this paper, the core focus will primarily give attention to the cooperative of “*نساء الورد Femme des Roses*” for two main central reasons: it one-hundred per cent a women based cooperative then it was founded in the heart of Covid 19 crisis.

The first section will be devoted to the general view of the region’s patriarchal society of Qalaat Maggounat that women are allegedly conceived as vulnerable beings and that their attempt to run any business will be doomed to reach a fiasco shortly. According to the manager of the cooperative (**Mrs. Khadija Monadil**) affirmed that she received endless and disheartening warnings of her relatives together with those of her friends and neighbors especially the project had been launched in 2020 that is to say in the core of Covid 19. They bombarded her with plenty of intimidating expressions such as “business is men’s business”, “women’s business is a waste of time”, “women’s rightful business is housework”, “a woman should not encroach on men’s borders” among other articulations. However, armed with self-confidence, audacious aspiration and a vigorous charisma, I went beyond the closure of the relatives, friends and neighbors and I sought refuge in indomitable-equipped women who make defiance as their permanent motto.

Incessant phone calls reached all remote old friends, WhatsApp message and audios and videos are diffused profusely and face-to-face meeting were held daily; these are the strategic mechanisms that are accounted for in order to initiate this female cooperative from scratch. A career in building and stablishing a cooperative necessitates significant procedures of hand-on experiences, which presents many challenges for the recruited women hoping to be engaged in this particular field. One potential solution that might provide a magic key is to consult people with enough perception who, in fact, offered their astute guidance and instructions about the issue of our projects. We took their recommendations seriously and hence each one of us shows deliberate readiness to collect as much information as possible despite the parallel domestic and public tasks that we have to perform. As it is strongly believed that the right is for those who ask for it; our efforts are successfully cropped up and our dreams come true once the administrative procedures of the cooperative are fully completed. This is the first step through which we fight back the crisis and the challenges of getting started fruitfully and our accomplishment has been a turning point for both males and females to reconsider their inveterate and deep-rooted conceptualizations about the vulnerability of women in running a certain business especially in some regions of Morocco such as Qalaat Maggouna.

To recapitulate, the cooperative “*نساء الورد Femme des Roses*” has been launched in the course of quarantine of Covid 19 which was characterized with plenty of measures, ranging from wearing masks, local permissions granted by Mukaddam or Chiekh or national permissions approved by the Pacha. These regulations and fixed measures have created many hindrances that deterred in a way or another the normal management of the project especially the procedures of



distilling and extracting the perfumes of roses, packaging and selling. We found ourselves in the heart of the crisis because our regular clients did not ask for more products as they used to do, the exhibition days which constitute a way-out for our products are fired by the quarantine measures. Most frightening is that the customers' financial conditions have been disturbed by the expenditures of Covid 19.

All these unpredictable happenings, distressing as they may seem, did not shake nor did they intimidate our steady faith in carrying the project to the utmost summit of accomplishment. The financial issue has been the core difficulty we have faced, but it has been only a transient incident or rather a summer cloud that vanishes imperceptibly. The end of the quarantine brings with an epiphanic enlightenment that eradicates the blurring atmosphere instigated and prompted of the days of Covid 19 as we manage to sell out almost the products stockpiled in the cooperative storehouse.

The cooperative, however, has been challenged by the administrative regulations and this task, ranging from the procedures of Assurance de Maladie Obligatoire (AMO), (Compulsory Health Insurance (CHI), taxes, and fundings, opens a new stance of crisis that has impactfully disturbed the regular harmony of the permanent staff. We found ourselves at the forefront of the battle against the measures of the administration as we are exposed to multidimensional problems.

Despite the low and irregular income which the women workforce benefit from the manufactured products, all of them express their unreservedly gratification of the job they carry out. It becomes for the personnel a deep self-consolation and self-conviction that spending time in a small business both in the short run and the long run is socially and economically more advantageous than wasting time mindlessly. Exercising a certain livelihood in small town such as Maggouna plays a significant key role and represents a rather financial independence especially for women. The stability of this mainstream is, nonetheless, deeply shaken by the imposition of what is called "Assurance de Maladie Obligatoire (AMO), (عن المرض التأمين الجباري) (Compulsory Health Insurance (CHI)" as the majority of staff has either to opt for the insignificant revenue of the cooperative or to choose the dependent on the returns of their husbands' retirement pensions. The staff found themselves torn between two severely mandatory choices with no third alternative that might offer them a way-out opportunity to develop their financial independent and secure the short run and long run needs.

The cooperative women workforce was surprised by the unscheduled committee that asked them to fill in a certain form that would guarantee their health security. Surprisingly, they were informed later on that the decision they had taken was a deceitful measure that would deprive them of their husbands' retirement pensions. Such government procedure created a shockingly torn asunder crisis for the women of the cooperative as it constitutes a real threat to the possible surviving of their jobs. In this perilously critical situation, the women



have to face and to withstand the double-edged and high-pitched predicament of both Covid 19 and that of “Assurance de Maladie Obligatoire (AMO), (عن المرض التأمين الإجباري) (Compulsory Health Insurance (CHI))”.

They have to take a crucial and reason-based decision but not a haphazard and arbitrary one in order to divest themselves of the heavy load they were carrying alone. The women decided to renounce their official memberships in the cooperative in order to, on one hand to warrant the retirement pension, and to prolong their affiliation to the cooperative through completing their task at home. The double-edged emergency has been dissipated in piecemeal thanks to the strong belief of the women staff in their unshakable potentials and firm charisma in fulfilling their task to the brim.

The third component that constitutes a permanent menace to the cooperative's essence at large but with a particular focus on the ingredients of its products. In this specific concern, the cooperative deemed it crucial to take into account to put in practice literally the mechanisms of what is called the SWOT, that to say we have to consider the apparatuses of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of our business. Our strengths reside in our constant belief that we can defy whatever challenges we can face; the weaknesses emanate from external parameters especially administrative and marketing of the products nationwide and why not worldwide; we have taken the advantages of the opportunities that have been offered by the natural and local ingredients that will be manufactured, packaged and presented to the customers; finally, our cooperative faces the threats of being singled out as a project that opts for perfectionism and quality preservation.

Being firm to our motto that our products are one-hundred natural, the cooperative, especially along the days of Covid, becomes short of purely natural wheat, corn, barley and other grains. The shortage of these basic ingredients created a fundamental quandary and makes us wondering if we can maintain the same quality that our customer base was used to. The majority of our consumers see that genetically modified products are not at all their cup of tea. The question, however, where can we get these natural products and how could we reach our customers as pandemic strict measures besieged and paralyzed the mechanisms of marketing of our cooperative. Despite this persistent dilemma, we do our best to provide the clients with natural products even if we paid dearly for this excellence.

The crisis of the issue of quality includes also the distillation process of roses and the way how we can keep what is called “water of rose” in good quality for a long time. The problem lies in essential oil as the latter is conceived as preservative substance. Being true to ourselves, we dispense with the high price of the essential oil that we can get from selling this substance and we opt for preserving our reputation as perfectionists. Put differently, if we produce “water of rose” without the substance of essential oil, it will be get rotten in a few days.





## **Conclusion**

The last decades have marked a radical perspective in women's empowerment and has gained immense significance in the academic discourse. In the broad sense of the term, women's empowerment denotes the mechanisms through which women have access to exercise their rights and have control over the parameters of their activities be they social, economic or political. This globally recognized agenda becomes an ineluctable issue especially in promoting equality in sustainable development.

Women's empowerment is not an easy task to could be concretized and achieved in a fortnight span of time but it needs a long run sacrificial acts of self-denial that would crop up and fruitfully harvested. In fact, to fully achieve this right, different complementarily intersectional procedures should be accomplished, ranging from substantial infrastructures, chiefly "well-functioning and resourced gender equality institutions", in addition to inclusive public leadership that constitutes the key pillars of establishing egalitarian share of power between men and women alike.

To give the devil his due, we, I mean women, recognized that there are some measures have taken in the last decades to implement women's empowerments in Morocco though they have been very faint-hearted decisions because women have not benefited from a larger scale of public affairs. This may be due to the absence of the enactment of the laws and regulations that allow women to fully integrate in the sphere of decision-making in the broad sense of the word.



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Appendix

