Empowering Moroccan Girls through Education: A 'liberal' or 'liberating' Approach?

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Abstract

Women's empowerment is one of the main goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework that is adopted by many developing countries, including Morocco, to fight poverty and gender discrimination. The Fourth and fifth goals in this framework aim at putting gender equality and women's empowerment on the agenda of education and literacy policy makers by eliminating gender disparity in primary, secondary and tertiary education. To do so, Morocco is committed to build on the partnership opportunities with U.N agencies like Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) to develop a gender-sensitive approach with specific and clear goals that would enable the implementation of gender mainstreaming at all levels and stages of policy making. In doing so, The Moroccan government will not only be able to solve gender-inequalities in different life domains including education, but also develop a policy arsenal that goes in-line with the international goals on gender equality. However, it is argued that the SDGs framework does not serve women's cause as it serves liberal agendas by shifting the attention from real empowerment of women to integrating them in the economic system, turning them into a *'new proletariat'*. Therefore, this study analyzes the MCC's gender policy along with Gender and Social Inclusion Dimensions Action Plan (GISAP) using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis model in the light of Sardenberg's [31] conceptualization of women's empowerment and current development approaches to see if the approach that the Moroccan government is adopting is 'liberating' girls or fostering 'liberal' ideology. Results showed that this approach considers empowerment an instrument for economic growth and a fertile ground for strengthening liberal ideology through a horizontal and narrow interpretation of empowerment. Thus, girls and women should be empowered through a vertically-oriented approach that enhances their participation in policy making, inhibits discriminatory practices and challenges patriarchal structures.

Keywords:

Women's empowerment, Sustainable Development Goals, Education, Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

Women's and girl's empowerment is declared as an objective in many development projects around the globe, and Morocco is not an exception. The concept of empowerment constitutes and guides development discourse all over the world, especially in the global south. This well-established concept has different interpretations in literature, as researchers and development agencies define it according to their ideological claims. Patel [23] conceptualizes empowerment as a process and outcome, the means and the end at the same time. Batliwala [4] perceives empowerment as a process of changing power relations between individuals and groups, the empowered and disempowered. She focused on embedding 'power' within this concept, that is, the power to have control over symbolic resources, material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. In a general sense, Gibson [14] argues that empowerment is a process that enables individuals, communities or nations to assert their right to control factors that affect their lives.

Batliwala [4] states that the goals of women's empowerment are to fight against gender inequalities and challenge patriarchy, Patel [23] joined her in this view by stating that it must lead to an end of women's subordination. To this end, education is recognized as a critical factor in women's empowerment development programs enabling them to obtain greater access to and control over skills, knowledge and material resources necessary to raise their status and challenge the ideologies of discrimination and subordination [35]. More than two decades ago, the United Nations Millennium declaration asserted that every individual has the right to education, among other rights that were declared as universal goals within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) framework. This framework that targeted only developing countries was revalued at United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. This Conference galvanized an approach to develop a new framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that will build on the MDGs progress and eventually serve as a global development framework beyond 2015 for all developed and developing countries [33].

Morocco has asserted to achieve these goals by altering its national development vision through an overall assessment of the MDGs accomplishments to be valued and reinforced as well as challenges to be faced with respect to the guidelines specified by international development agendas. The commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in SDGs contains (a) goal 4: ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, and (b) goal 5: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. To achieve these two interrelated goals, and fully implement the 2030 agenda, Morocco has announced a major collaboration with Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), an independent United States foreign assistance agency, to assess SDGs, relate it to the national context and elaborate a national action plan to facilitate the full implementation of the SDGs. This collaboration gave rise to The Millennium Challenge Account-Morocco Agency (MCA-Morocco) in 2016 which has replaced the government of Morocco to work on post-2015 issues related to education and employability. To invest in gender equality and empowerment of girls and women, the MCA has crafted Gender and Social Inclusion Dimensions Action Plan (GISAP), in line with MCC's gender policy guidelines, to ensure that social inclusion and

gender equality are integrated in every aspect related to planning, implementation and evaluation of all projects connected with the SDGs.

Theoretical Framework

Women's empowerment

Empowerment of women is basically about promoting social, economic, cultural and political standing of women. In other words, it is about developing society in a direction that liberates women and gives them the freedom to take decisions on their own for their benefit and the benefit of society as a whole. It is also about accomplishing increased engagement in policy making to gain equal footing with men in society. Sardenberg [31] in her influential paper distinguished between two approaches to women's empowerment, liberal and liberating.

Liberal empowerment

Liberal empowerment is a distinctive feature of international development agencies; this approach considers women's empowerment as an instrument for development goals and primacies, be they enhancing democracy or alleviating poverty. In harmony with liberal ideology, it focuses on individual growth, but in a narrow perspective, in other words, on the rational action of individuals based on their self-interests. In this approach, individuals are empowered to satisfy their own interests. It is an approach that renders empowerment apolitical as it takes 'power' out of it. It focuses on technical and instrumental aspects that can be 'taught' in special training courses, instead.

Liberating empowerment

Liberating empowerment, on the other hand, revolves around power relations. Empowerment in this approach is a means and an end in itself, as it is considered a process by which women gain financial independence and self-determination, as well as an instrument for challenging the status quo and patriarchy through organization and collective action of women, not on individual self-interests, to ensure transformational social change. According to this approach, challenging patriarchal relations necessitates the recognition of the ideology that underpins and legitimizes male domination and a deep understanding of how it eternizes their oppression.

Development Approaches

The Women in Development (WID) Approach.

In the early 1970s, Ester Boserup, a Danish feminist economist, wrote a book titled, 'Women's Role in Economic Development'. This book highlighted the fact that women are not only users of basic services, bearers and socializers of children and keepers of the home, but they also represent a productive potential which was not being tapped. Proponents of the WID approach were among the first to point to women's lack of access to the means of participating in economic life, and the lack of recognition and data of women's work. This approach was adopted by UN in 1975 at the first World Conference on Women held in Mexico after the establishment of an Office of Women in Development in 1973 by the United States Agency for International Development. By the 1980, many countries and international agencies had made

efforts to include women's issues in development plans by setting up special bureaus, offices, and in some cases ministries [21].

The aim of WID was to integrate women into economic development by focusing on women's productive work in two ways. First, by providing money for women and other resources for income generation activities. Second, developing appropriate technologies to lighten women's loads. This approach is grounded in modernization theory or the belief that economic development can be achieved through industrialization [20].

WID is criticized for viewing women in isolation and ignoring their relative position to men. It also focuses exclusively on the productive aspects of women's work, ignoring or minimizing the reproductive side of women's lives. Thus, WID projects typically have been income-generating activities where women are taught a particular skill or craft and sometimes are organized into marketing cooperatives, believing that gender issues and relations will change of themselves as women become full economic partners in development [20].

The Women and Development (WAD) Approach.

The (WID) approach was developed by women and feminists from the west, in the second half of the 1970s, the women and development (WAD) approach was advocated by women from the non-west, Africa, South America and Asia who felt that the 'bigger' issues of colonialism and unequal global relationships had not been taken into account in the WID approach [27].

This approach argues that women have always been part of the development processes but that their work has been exploited to profit others in the global North. The WAD paradigm focuses on the distinctive roles, responsibilities, work and knowledge of women and its proponents call for these points to be acknowledged and valued. It advocates increasing women's share in resources, land, and employment and income. The WAD perspective, therefore, is more concerned with the relationship between women and development rather than the integration of women into development [27].

WAD offers a more critical view of women's position than does WID, but it fails to undertake a full-scale analysis of the relationship between patriarchy, differing modes of production and women's subordination and oppression. This approach downplays the class, racial and ethnic differences among women, and focuses on international relations of power. However, it neglects relations between gender and classes. The WAD approach; therefore, underplays the role of patriarchy in undermining women's development and does not adequately address the question of social relations between men and women and their impact on development [27].

Gender and Development (GAD) Approach.

The third major approach and the most recent one is gender and development (GAD) approach. It was developed in the 1980s as an alternative to the modernization theory. Women, in this approach, are recognized as a diverse group with interests which vary by class, age and ethnicity. It recognizes men and women as equal partners in development [27].

GAD looks at the impact of development on both women and men. It seeks to ensure that both women and men participate in and benefit equally from development, and so emphasizes equality of benefit and control. It recognizes that women may be involved in development, but not necessarily benefit from it. GAD is not concerned with women exclusively like WID and

WAD, but also with the social relations between men and women. This perspective emphasizes the equal access of women and men to the control over resources and benefits that accrue from development [27].

GAD goes further than the other approaches in emphasizing both the reproductive and the productive roles of women. It treats development as a complex process that is influenced by political, social and economic factors rather than a state or stage of development. The GAD approach, therefore, goes beyond seeing development as mainly economic well-being to emphasize the importance of social and mental well-being of a person. That is, the GAD approach recognizes women as agents of change rather than mere recipients of development and it asserts the need for women to mobilize in order to achieve greater political impact and increase the number of women in decision making [27].

Methodological Framework

Critical Discourse analysis (CDA)

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a growing interdisciplinary research movement composed of multiple distinct theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of language. Each has its own particular agenda. Despite this diversity, CDA scholars commonly view language as a form of social practice, and are concerned with systematically investigating hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse. They are; likewise, dedicated to examining social and material consequences of discourse. Sharing Foucault's dialectical view of discourse, CDA researchers consider discourse to be socially shaped as well as socially constitutive. They maintain an explicit impetus to intervene actively in, or challenge, the power relations or social problems under investigation [17]. Critical discourse analysis encourages researchers to ask questions like:

- If we are determined by social discourse, what determines the discourse?
- What rules, codes, and ideologies dictate the way we engage in discourse – that is, how we speak, behave, interact, and perceive?
- If discourse refers to a particular view of an event, who creates that view?

CDA is used by researchers as a theoretical framework to explain the relations between discourse, power, and ideology across micro-, meso-, and macrolevel social and spatial scales and phenomena. There are different approaches to CDA and any particular approach has various strengths, weaknesses, and navigational challenges [17].

Norman Fairclough model: Discourse as Social Practice.

Fairclough's three-Dimensional framework was developed to study the interrelationship between discourse and wider social structures. It is slightly similar to the social-cognitive model of Van Dijk and the discourse-historic model of Wodak. However, this framework holds a more social-theoretical view towards analyzing data than the two other models. This framework is a three-level analysis model. These levels are: Text, Discursive practice and Social practice.

First level: Text

The aim behind the first dimension is to analyze and study textual features of discourses. Through this level of analysis, Fairclough tries to give researchers a tool to question how texts are designed, why they are designed that way, and how else it could have been designed [12], along with analyzing how vocabulary, grammar, syntax or specific lexis are used.

Second Level: Discursive practice

By integrating the analysis of discursive practices, researchers can reveal how writers produce texts as well as how readers or receivers use and understand them [28]. This dimension involves the analysis of the production, distribution and consumption of texts [12], through understanding the background knowledge (e.g. genres and discourses) that writers based the production of their texts on and the one that receivers used to decipher the meanings in those texts (Ibid).

Third Level: language use as social practice

The last dimension of Fairclough's model aims at analyzing how discursive practices affect social practices by reinforcing a particular discourse or inhibiting another. By understanding how social practices are shaped or/and reshaped, researchers can reveal how concepts of ideology, power and hegemony function through these three levels [28].
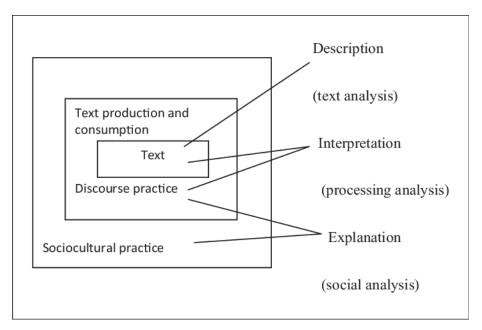

Figure 1: Norman Fairclough's Sociocultural Model

Data collection procedures

The objective of this qualitative study is to explore if the approach adopted by the MCA-Morocco to empower girls through education is 'liberating' girls or fostering 'liberal' ideology in light of Sardenberg's [31] conceptualization of women's empowerment and current development approaches to have a clear and holistic idea about the theoretical and ideological

foundations of the adopted approach. Fairclough's [13] theoretical framework of CDA has been used as an instrumental tool for the analysis of the Gender and Social Inclusion Dimensions Action Plan (GISAP), and MCC's Gender Policy guidelines. While this topic certainly deserves detailed inquiry, a thorough examination of these documents is beyond the scope of this paper. Only few, short and topically related excerpts are extracted and analyzed.

Results

By closely scrutinizing the MCC's gender policy and the Social Inclusion Dimensions Action Plan (GISAP), the present study revealed that empowerment of girls is viewed as nothing more than equal access to education for the ultimate objective of developing human capital and work force to better perform in global markets. The results demonstrated that this reform reduces only horizontal inequalities between women and men and promotes liberal ideologies.

MCC gender policy

The equal horizontal focus on both women and men devalues the meaning of gender equality and women empowerment that require a vertically-oriented focus on women's social and political issues [26]. This excerpt that was extracted from the MCC gender policy report reflects perfectly the previously mentioned idea.

> The commitment of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) to *gender equality* is grounded in *our mission* to *promote economic growth* and *poverty reduction*. MCC recognizes that many *countries with high levels of gender inequality* also experience *high levels of poverty* and that gender inequality can be a *significant constraint to economic growth* and *poverty reduction*. [emphasis added]

The noun phrase "*Our mission*" in this excerpt is a deictic expression as it refers to the whole agenda of the MCC. An agenda that focuses exclusively on gender equality in access to economic resources and the agency to use them. Their mission is restricted only to promote economic growth and alleviate poverty by ensuring equal economic opportunities to both men and women. Gender mainstreaming is; therefore, used as a tool to promote economic development. According to Pettersson [24] in this horizontal-gendered view of empowerment, gender inequality is considered a direct indicator that the country's citizens are not being harnessed to the fullest extent allowing the development of the economy, and the country at large, which means individuals' agency is being instrumentalized for the benefit of development projects. This view is also consistent with Martha Nussbaum's [22] property of instrumentality, she introduced seven properties of objectification and stated that individuals are objectified if one or more of these seven properties are applied to them. By instrumentality she means using a person as a tool to achieve a specific end. The rational of this instrumentalist perspective originates from the World Bank's ideas of women's empowerment as 'smart economics', which means investing in girls for more and better economic expansion [8]. Rationalizing girls and women's agency as an engine for development has an inhibiting effect

as it makes them work for development, rather than making development work for their equality and empowerment [10].

The stances of international development agencies are reflected in their use of different discourses, as the following excerpt adds to the previously mentioned ideological position. By reading it carefully, it seems that these agencies and bureaucracies in program countries consider development as an extension of economic planning [16].

> [The] Compact program components are designed to take into account gender differences and correct *gender inequalities* that are *constraints to economic growth* and *poverty reduction* in a Compact program. [emphasis added]

Gender inequalities are depicted here as one of the constraints of economic growth. By reversing the meaning of this discourse, it becomes clear that the aim is to make women and girls contribute their maximum to the project of world economic development, thus focusing mainly on the 'business side' of girls and women's empowerment. In the same respect, Robert Zoellick, a former World Bank president, asserts that "Investing in adolescent girls is precisely the catalyst poor countries need to break intergenerational poverty and to create a better distribution of income. Investing in them is not only fair, it is a smart economic move" [25]. What Zoellick said indicates that this approach is superficial and ignores the real issues that hinders women's empowerment like altering political and social structures. Therefore, the agenda of empowering women through smart economics is far from what empowerment really entails.

Through a careful perusal of the MCC's gender policy, it becomes clear that the underlining ideals of this action plan are liberal in nature, as it strives to help citizens, women in this case, perceive themselves as empowered but in an atomistic perspective.

> The focus will be on *investments* that improve the *productive potential* of *the country's citizens* and businesses and help *the country* integrate into the *global economy* and *capital markets*. [emphasis added]

The above excerption vividly demonstrates that this agenda considers empowerment as a tool for development goals not an end in itself as it is assumed. The focal points in this excerption are *investments* and *productive potential of citizens*, that being so, empowerment is reflected and can be gauged by individual growth. This minimalist conceptualization of empowerment is built upon Max Weber's notion of goal-oriented rational social action [30], this is, on actions that elicit individual benefits. This conceptualization views rational action as a factor for measuring sustainable development [2], and dilutes empowerment by voiding it from its essence, which is power [5]. Thus, it does not question the *status quo* but preserves the structures of dominance and power [30]. In fact, the central and real agent in the above excerpt is not "*citizens*" but the "*country*" as the ultimate aim is to integrate it into the global economy. As a result, citizenship is deemed to have an instrumental value, as well [19]. That is, it becomes objectified through a set of human capacities, liabilities and/or 'materialities' and, subsequently, a tool for connecting what is local to the global. This brings us to Bourdieu's concept of the 'Pre-constructed Object', which means, in this instance, that citizenship is constructed upon some predetermined characteristics and/or practice-specific meanings [9].

This entails that international development agencies, through global market expansion, instrumentalizes gender equality and women's empowerment.

GISAP, Gender mainstreaming and Education

Education is believed to be a pathway to a better life for economically disadvantaged women [29]. On the ground of this, the government of Morocco has adopted a strategy that aims at mainstreaming gender into all levels of education based on its commitment to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to fight against poverty and gender inequality. To do so, a partnership agreement was signed with the MCC to start a project called the "secondary Education" activity.

> The *objective* of the "Secondary Education" project is to *enhance the employability* of *young people* by improving the *quality and relevance* of secondary education programs (middle and high schools) and guaranteeing *equitable access to the marketplace*. [emphasis added]

By delving deeper into the above excerpt, it becomes clear that this project places considerable emphasis on the notion that there should be an equal access to high-quality educational opportunities. The concepts of *quality* and *relevance* of educational programs stem from the contemporary Western liberal ideologies that demand a shift toward promoting the relevance of educational programs to meet the needs of labor markets and ensuring gender equality in access to these programs either in secondary education or vocational training [34]. Integrating the gender dimension in the employability process of young people, addresses only individual girls and their '*right*' to their job quotas. According to Sardenberg [32], solving women issues regarding economic empowerment and helping them unleash the full economic potential does not necessary lead to an alteration in traditional gender roles. Therefore, the perspective from which empowerment is tackled, in this project, is still atomistic and instrumental in its essence.

This perspective is reinforced in the Gender and Social Inclusion Action Plan (GISAP), as its objectives are '*instrumentalizing*' gender equality. That is, it overemphasizes equality and promotes individuality and autonomy at the expense of questioning the reproduction of patriarchal structures and altering power relationships between genders [11]. The six objectives of the "secondary education" activity in this action plan provides a procedural roadmap that maintains these structures and relations.

- Improving Financial Management Capacity in Schools.
- Rehabilitating the educational infrastructure.
- Modernization of equipment.
- Empowerment of teachers to promote *active and inclusive pedagogies.*
- Adoption of an educational approach that takes into account *girls' and vulnerable students' needs.*
- Strengthening learning assessment systems and school management system "Massar".

[emphasis added]

These objectives pave the way for a new vision in the field of education, a vision that is built upon the ideals of the long lasting literature of liberal education. According to Boyle Anderson [7] gender equality and inclusive pedagogy are two major components of liberal education. The concept of inclusion, in the above objective, refers to creating rich educational opportunities for all, boys and girls, and integrate all of them in the learning process [6]. However, behind this glossy statement resides a very narrow conception of inclusion. Gidley et al. [15] suggest that inclusion has three forms with varying degrees. Their continuum-like conception starts by the narrowest interpretation of inclusion as *access*, the broader one as *participation* and the broadest one as *empowerment*. In light of this, they argue that such large-scale reforms should not revolve around the notion of access, and inclusion should not be understood as straightforward kind of binary outcomes. By providing quality education for all students and respecting their needs and abilities, we are just ensuring that they have access to educational opportunities. This view originates from neoliberal ideology, which considers access as an opportunity to invest "in human capital and [improve] the skills shortages for the primary purpose of economic growth as part of a nationalist agenda to build the nation's economy in order to better perform in a competitive global market" [15].

> The *Secondary Education Activity* aims to design and demonstrate a new, cost-effective, sustainable, and scalable *model of public secondary schools* for delivering quality secondary education *focused on the employability skills* needed for the *modern workforce*. The Activity will also support key reforms to improve performance management systems, including education assessments and education management information systems. [emphasis added]

The above excerpt reflects perfectly Gidley et al.'s idea about *access* as a narrow interpretation of inclusion that serves capitalist powers at the expense of empowering girls. This interpretation is rooted in liberal ideologies, in which inclusion and empowerment are about investing in human capital and enhancing labor and skills shortage for the ultimate goal of stimulating economic development as part of a nationalist agenda to develop the country's economic system so as to better adopt the complex competitive standards of the global market [15].

Conclusion

The urgency to stimulate economic growth to better integrate into global markets made many developing countries, including Morocco, abide by international development agencies' recommendations and discourses. Discourses that are dominated by liberal ideologies, in which women appear as possible 'agents of development' and untapped 'human capital' to be harnessed to enhance economic growth. Such an ideology focuses on individual empowerment of women, that is, it takes a liberal stance regarding women's empowerment. In the same respect, Sardenberg [31] argued in her approach that any development project that focuses on the individual not on collective self-organization is liberal in essence. In her influential paper, in the IDS bulletin, Sardenberg [32] impressively showed how economic empowerment does not necessarily lead to a break in traditional gender roles. In light with what she said, Robinson-Pant [29] argued that women's empowerment should, however, be considered as a process through which women not only can participate in policy making and question the status quo,

but also explore and transform the national and global patriarchy structures. Based on the previously mentioned results, it becomes vividly clear that the 'secondary education' project and the whole reform is based on the WID approach. An approach that fosters the productivity and economic status of women by integrating them into current or planned development initiatives, but 'normalizes' with the existing social structures in the program country. Therefore, global south feminist powers should question the adoption of the 'old-fashioned' WID approach, as Rathgeber [27] stated this approach is known as being the "non-confrontational approach" as it does neither transform social structures nor question existing economic and political agendas.

Narrowing the interpretation of women's empowerment to *access*, restricting it to economic growth, and empting it from power, in fact, consecrate liberal ideology and unquestionably accept patriarchy thought. This, then, can have regressive effects on women as it was proven through rigorous examination. Economic growth does not necessarily go along side by side with gender equality, even though gender equality can boost economic growth under certain conditions [18]. In line with this, Ahmed [1] argues that promoting girls' education and empowering women to achieve financial independence may in some cases lead to an upsurge in gender-based violence from male family members or husbands. Such a violent response from males can originate from a feeling that their masculinity and/or the patriarchy, which favors them, are threatened by women's economic empowerment and greater financial independence. This brings attention to the urgency of gaining deeper understanding of men and masculinity, both theoretically and practically, and the importance of actively engaging men in gender equality. The road to achieving real women's empowerment is mutual, with the flow of power between both genders, not unidirectional and can only be done by adopting a gender-transformative approach that aims at addressing underlying causes of gender inequality. Barker [3], in the same respect, stated that a gender transformative program should not be based on the WID approach but on the GAD approach that focuses on social constructions of gender inequality and aims at challenging current gender roles and relations. That is, it becomes important to go beyond gender-sensitive approaches that address women's and men's needs from a narrow economic perspective to adopt a gender-transformative approach that considers broader perspectives tailored to implement actions and initiatives that question and change current discriminatory practices and/or policies and carries out changes for the betterment of quality of life for all.

From the same perspective, real empowerment of women and girls through education should go beyond acknowledging gender inequalities within the educational system and students learning experiences, and pursues to fully exploit the potential of education to alter discriminatory attitudes, practices and policies within and beyond the field of education to shape environmental justice outcomes for both women and men.

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