
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Women's organizations and the fight for women's rights: Case study of UAF and MRA

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| ABSTRACT

In an attempt to shed light on the efforts deployed by women's organizations in Morocco dealing with discrimination against women and gender inequality, and understand the nuances of women's culture in Morocco, this article will look at the beginnings, the missions and ideals of two renowned women's organizations, UAF (Union de l'Action Féminine) and MRA (Mobilising for Rights Associates). Since their inception, they have strived to improve women's situation and help ease the hurdles that women face at the social, economic and political levels. This article will rely on a qualitative explorative study to present an account of UAF and MRA's missions and their fight against women's discrimination and gender inequality.

| KEYWORDS

Women's Organizations in Morocco, Gender Inequality, Discrimination Against Women, l'Union de l'Action Féminine (UAF), Mobilising for Rights Associates (MRA)

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1. Introduction

Countless organizations in Morocco are founded with a mission to fight against women's discrimination and as such, this article will attempt to examine women's culture in Morocco through the work done and projects carried out by two renowned women's organizations: l'Union de l'Action Féminine or UAF, a national organization deeply embedded in Morocco's civil society and Mobilising for Rights Associates or MRA, an influential international organization with a focus on advocacy and legal reform. Both organizations operate on Moroccan grounds and work on sensitizing Moroccan society about forms of discrimination against women and gender inequality, assess discrepancies in the laws and present solutions to improving women's social, economic, political and legal situation.

Both organizations play significant roles in addressing the multi-layered obstacles women face in Morocco, with a particular focus on gender-based violence, legal reforms, and societal attitudes toward women. Operating within the unique socio-political context of Moroccan society, these two organizations strive to raise awareness about the many forms of discrimination faced by women and work to address legal inconsistencies that limit women's rights.

By proposing comprehensive solutions to improve the social, economic, political, and legal conditions of women, they actively contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable society. Through a detailed exploration of their contributions and strategies, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the approaches these organizations employ to combat systemic barriers, shift societal perceptions, and foster genuine gender equality. Their efforts not only reflect the broader fight for women's rights in Morocco, but also contribute to the global movement advocating for the empowerment and equality of women everywhere.

2. Literature Review

Before delving into the projects carried out by both organizations, it is crucial to provide a contextual framework on what discrimination against women means, its link to gender inequality and how women's rights culture in Morocco was initiated to guide Moroccan women towards a life free of discrimination. A 2015 National Council for Human Rights report, discusses that there are four main elements or factors that "interact strongly on the particular vulnerability of women and girls to discrimination: poverty, age, disability and social exclusion. Combined, these factors make certain categories of women forgotten from public policies or subordinates. Indeed, during the past decade, the overall improvement in living standards has significantly reduced poverty in Morocco. However, poverty is not only monetary but strongly depends on how laws and institutions function and interact with citizens".

Supporting this, Elliot (2014) indicates in "Morocco and Its Women's Rights Struggle: A Failure to Live Up to Its Progressive Image" that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women: "...recognizes discrimination against women to be linked intrinsically with lack of gender equality. It defines gender equality in a holistic manner, applicable to both the public and domestic spheres, in addition to situating it within the international (universal) regime of human rights".

Since its independence in 1956, among the many projects that Morocco focused on, was laying the ground for transformations in women's rights. Hanafi and Hites (2017) highlight the importance of the work done by Morocco: "to establish parity between the sexes in constitutional, family and criminal law on the books. Feminist civil society and non-governmental organizations, composed mainly of educated, urban women, have been at the forefront of organizing and lobbying in favor of these reforms".

Democratic Association of Women in Morocco (ADFM), Union of Feminist Action (UAF), Moroccan Association of Women's Rights (AMDF), Democratic League of Women's Rights (LDDF), and Jousour, a forum for Moroccan women, were among the first women's organizations in Morocco created in mid 80s through 90s. These women's organizations were driven by feminist ideology and led the way towards offering a platform for women to speak about their situation, ensuring that women and men are equal before the law and creating programs and projects dedicated to improving women's economic, social and political situation.

Gardner (2010) highlights the significance of the projects carried by the early women's organizations and states that: "since Morocco gained its independence from France in 1956, there have been many changes to women's rights. Across the nation, women continue to fight for their rights in legal, social, political and economic contexts. Although work remains, local organizations have made great strides in improving the status of women's rights in Morocco". It is also important to note as Hanafi and Hites (2017) state that: "In recent years, Morocco has taken substantial steps to establish parity between the sexes in constitutional, family and criminal law on the books. Feminist civil society and non-governmental organizations, composed mainly of educated, urban women, have been at the forefront of organizing and lobbying in favor of these reforms".

The women's rights movement in Morocco which consisted of not only women's organizations, but also all the men and women involved, strived to improve women's situation and status in society (Naciri, 2014). Though the beginnings were not easy, the first five organizations mentioned above paved the way and created a platform where women felt encouraged to speak about the hardships they face on a daily basis. As such, Morocco has always been one of the leading countries in this aspect and in a study conducted between January 2013 and November of 2014, the purpose of providing an account of the historical background of the women's human rights movement in Morocco, Benadada et al (2014) pointed to the fact that: "In terms of the women's movement, Morocco is considered in many countries to be a unique experience. Indeed, it has been a long road for women human rights activists to be recognized and respected for their work".

Even more recently, on the occasion of the Throne Day celebrated on July 30, 2022, his Majesty King Mohammed VI, emphasized the importance of the promotion of women's status through granting them opportunities for development and ensuring equality between women and men in terms of rights and obligations.

3. Methodology

To better understand women's culture in Morocco, the interviews' questions focused on examining details pertaining to how both UAF and MRA were created, their mission statement, goals, principal activities, projects carried out, measurement and assessment of the impact of their efforts, and the funding received.

The interviews consisted of close-ended and open-ended questions, which helped in creating a discussion-like format and gaining a more in-depth understanding of the directors' experiences, opinions and perceptions about the work done by their organizations. Ethnographic approaches are much needed in this type of research, as they will allow for a more descriptive and interpretive approach. I relied on the naturalistic approach, and it is referred to as such since "the ethnographic approach is naturalistic, in that

it attempts to work with society as it is, without trying to influence or control it. The goal is to understand behavior in its habitual context, as opposed to an abstract or laboratory setting, and to interpret how people give meaning to their experiences" (Della Porta and Keating, 2008). Throughout the interviews process, the aim was to examine and assess the data gathered from the interviews with the directors of MRA and UAF and see how their work demonstrates a continuation of the work done since the start of the women's rights culture in Morocco.

4. Results and Discussion

UAF: The struggle for women's rights

L'Union de l'Action Féminine (Union of Feminist Action), a non-governmental, non-profit association that was founded in 1987 with the objective of improving women's situation and sensitizing people about their hardships, working closely with women, ensuring political and judicial closeness and finding solutions for them through holding seminars, conferences and round tables. UAF's objectives are about the: "promotion of women at the socio-economic and legal level, eradication of all forms of discrimination against women, fight against the illiteracy of women, allow women to have access to decision-making positions and fight against violence" (Euro Mediterranean Women's Foundation).

The head of UAF Rabat recounts that her beginnings in dealing with discrimination against women and gender inequality started back in 1983 with the 8 Mars Magazine where she was a key member. 8 Mars magazine was the first transgressive Moroccan women's magazine founded by militants of the democratic labor organizations and was named after women's international day. The 1980s and 1990s represented a period of reflection on women's situation and an increase in writings regarding the matter compared to the past, where male writings on women's situation were the ones dominating.

The magazine started on a volunteering basis and was very much distinguished due to the fact that it had a page dedicated to writing about women's situation and serving as a guide for women to familiarize them with their rights and obligations. UAF's head recalls that the members of the magazine wrote about experiences of some of the women's movements from abroad, using them as a reference for cases encountered in Morocco. The magazine focused on creating a transgressive open space for women from different societal segments. The first pages of the magazine were about introducing the family code 'moudawanna' and the constitution as well as other topics of similar calibre. There was also a section open to women referred to as 'let me speak' and included women's stories of domestic violence.

The founders of 8 Mars magazine and the women (volunteer writers and contributors), tried helping women by listening to their stories, writing about them and relying on experts in the social, political, legal and psychological fields as a way of combining efforts to find solutions to the hardships faced by women daily. UAF's head highlighted a very important aspect, which is even with those writings, the Mars 8 women thought that Moroccan women's situation cannot be improved unless the Moroccan society is sensitized to the social, economic, political or legal hardships faced by women.

While conducting field work in Morocco in 2014 for her book titled "The Moroccan Women's Rights Movement", Evrard (2014) also was made aware of the importance of sensitizing societies and changing mentalities and she noted that: "activists often referred to this need for education as a need to "change mentalities" (taghayer al-'aqaliyat, changer les mentalités) and generally saw it as the more difficult goal to attain".

Supporting the claim of UAF's head about the significance of the work done by women's organizations, Zirari (2010) specifies that: "the mobilisation of women's NGOs since the end of the 1980s has allowed the onset of significant legal reforms. These reforms could not have been passed into law without a major mobilisation led by diverse organizations, among them women's organizations, through networks and groups connecting civil society. Using proposals, memorandums, parallel reports, campaigns and lobbying, they managed to convince a large section of the political class to back their demands".

UAF's trainings and income-generating projects focusing on fighting illiteracy were leading the way to women's economic empowerment that was considered as an entry towards women's liberation from societal obstacles. Other projects were dedicated to fighting violence against women where UAF relied on the services of a lawyer, psychiatrist, listener and a social assistant who would work closely with the women, listen to their issues and offer them guidance and assistance. The women who benefited from UAF's services were also involved in sensitization workshops regarding international conventions, legal procedures and Moroccan laws. The women were encouraged to not only sit aside and watch, but write down their complaints by themselves and submit them to the courts as well as be actors, in all manifestations organized by UAF.

In 1996, UAF created a symbolic court for women that has the same structure as a real court. It is held on March 08 of every year and so far, 18 symbolic courts took place in different cities in Morocco. The court is usually constituted of 2 judges (UAF can sometimes rely on real judges); militants, lawyers and a committee chosen from civil society. Invitations to attend the symbolic courts have been extended to Ministers as well as to news outlets such as 2M to report on the event. Each year, the courts focus on a different theme and the verdicts are shared nationally and internationally as a way of sharing what UAF has accomplished with regards to improving women's legal status.

Even if the court represents an opportunity for the women to denounce violence against them and actors of civil society are acting tirelessly to assist and guide them, it seems highly judicial that Morocco also be part of such action and take a stand to ensure that social and economic rights are in fact attained. As such, UAF sought funding from Moroccan Ministries such as the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Family and Solidarity provided funding. Other external funders also contributed to funding UAF's projects, such as Spain, France, Netherlands as well as some Embassies.

Although during its beginnings, according to UAF's head, the organization was against asking/receiving funds, conducting field work with the local communities and creating projects for the women, required UAF to ask for funds. Funding is received after a detailed project is submitted and evaluated by a committee of experts. Once accepted, the project receives the appropriate funding to be carried out. Limitations of funding are linked to it being limited in time where the money provided should be spent and accounted for during the specified period of time indicated in the project proposal.

Receiving the funds and creating the projects for the women, would not be the last stage of UAF's involvement in the fight for women's rights, an assessment of their projects is very much needed to ensure that women in fact do understand their rights as well as their obligations and are able to face obstacles with determination and courage. UAF bases the impact of their projects on the laws created to serve women's needs; for instance, in the case of Moudawana (family law), UAF's actions regarding violence against women led to creating a law that condemns violence against women and the campaigns that have been taken place in Morocco are the outcomes of UAF's efforts in that regard.

One very clear example of the impact of UAF is how the symbolic court led to breaking the silence concerning violence against women. Elliot (2015) indicates in "Modernizing Patriarchy: The Politics of Women's Rights in Morocco" that organizations such as UAF now use "the Mudawana as an educational tool in the hope that concentrating on the family code's spirit rather than its letter in their diverse awareness campaigns shall foster the kind of culture in which gender equality will become a lived reality before it can be transformed into a fully implemented law".

Eddouada (2016) also shows the diverse work of UAF where on 7 March 1992, they: "launched a one million-signature petition to revise the Family Code...UAF's petition has succeeded in unravelling and removing the debate on women's rights from a closed circle of conservative theologians to public debates in the national and international media".

UAF's Centre Annajda (Centre d'Aide pour Femmes Victimes de Violence) is another successful attempt as described by UAF's head for the organization, to help battered women talk about the issues they encounter at their homes. The women can either call UAF office and talk to a listener and a psychiatrist or come to UAF office in Rabat, which they are not always able to do due to family issues and lack of resources. For instance, having to take more than one mean of transportation to get to UAF for the session reserved for them.

Showcasing the diverse projects that UAF has carried out in the past and the ones that are currently operating puts this renowned women's organization in a competition against itself. In our attempt to assess UAF head's answers and trace the successes of the organization's projects, in parallel with what is taking place in reality, it was crucial to visit UAF's headquarters to witness first hand how the daily operations are managed and whether accessing annual activity reports of their work was at all possible. This has proven to not be the case even after several attempts.

Lacking accessibility to reports from UAF's office or reports written by other entities discussing the organization's work makes it harder if not possible to assess their work and see how it compares to its legacy. A legacy that puts UAF among the renowned women's organizations in Morocco. Funding also had proven to be part of the issue. The head mentioned how the funding is limited in time and even though, it keeps the project in question well-structured with well-defined objectives, it puts pressure on UAF to deliver on its objectives when the project is not completed while the funding is not provided. This in fact puts UAF in a difficult situation not only vis-à-vis the funders, but also with the women benefiting from the project (s) who place their trust in UAF and have hopes for a positive change.

Another important element regarding UAF's work has to do with the assessment of their projects. According to UAF's head, the organization is able to witness how women become courageous and able to defend themselves, but to what extent this can be evaluated. In fact, UAF needs to have a specific set of variables that are to be compared with the real outcomes of the projects. As it stands, there is an emptiness revolving around this aspect, which I experienced when I was conducting my study. The fact that UAF is unable to provide reports on their work or how it is assessed, puts their transparency into question.

MRA's contribution to women's rights:

Mobilising for Rights Associates or MRA is an international non-governmental organization registered in France and declared international in Morocco. It was co-founded by Stephanie Willman Bordat and Saida Kouzzi in 2013. Its mission is about contributing to change at the relational, legal and structural levels to promote women's human rights. MRA does not work directly with women; instead, it works with NGOs led by youth, activists and lawyers in different parts of Morocco including rural areas, shantytowns and popular urban neighborhoods "in efforts to decentralize and horizontalize the women's movement" (<https://mrawomen.ma/>). Their services consist of providing technical expertise and collaboration on the higher level supporting the local associations/organizations to perform their work in the best conditions possible. The organization as its head indicated, works behind the scenes and focus instead on delegating to women's associations and organizations allowing them to have a more hands-on experience and more involvement in the projects.

The values informed the mission of MRA both in terms of the outcomes to be achieved in terms of women's rights in Morocco and the process by which they wanted to achieve them. The focus was on how to operationalize the values, which led to having their mission is directly linked to the grassroots level where the organizations needed to think about how to change laws and policies, what structures are needed to implement those policies as well as how the cultural aspects of people's ideas, values and beliefs and people's relationships are intertwined.

Even though situations differ and women face hardships in different aspects of their lives, it is crucial to look at the situation holistically and assess what has been accomplished and how a certain solution was reached. When change happens, it does not necessarily mean or lead to progress; it is crucial to examine how attitudes, beliefs and society's structures shape the different perceptions of women's social, economic, political and legal situations.

The organization's activities are about bottom-up approach where the micro level is represented by relationships and cultures and the macro level is related to structure and laws. As Jad (2014) clarifies: "the proponents of a 'bottom up' approach argue that the organization of popular pressure and participation from below is a necessary pre-requisite for political change and economic progress. They are extremely sceptical about the ability and willingness of any regime truly to reform itself". This hints to the fact that people at the grassroots level can be closer and more knowledgeable about their communities' needs, which might not always be the case. Grassroot organization can claim that they are aware of what their communities' objectives are; however, those objectives might not always be aligned with those of the organization.

The legal accompaniment is another piece in MRA's work; it has to do with educating and mobilizing women at the grassroots level through human rights legal education. This in turn allows the NGOs to have a better take on how to handle women's legal situation and how to create more responsive programs depending on the issue at hand. For instance, the NGOs are the ones handling divorce cases filing for the women who were not able to so. In this regard, the NGOs play the role of an intermediary between the women and the court.

Gardner (2010) highlights the importance of strengthening the judicial system, focusing on eradicating the social and cultural barriers hindering women's emancipation and specifies that MRA as a key non-governmental organization: "work within the community and advocate legal reforms. These reforms promote women's social, economic, and political equality, monitor international human rights compliance and assist women's rights campaign".

With the continuous work of the NGOs and the obstacles that they were more often than not faced with, it became highly apparent that changes needed to be made on the laws set in place and that what led MRA to focus on the third piece of their work that has to do with law reform advocacy where it works with the local NGO campaigning for the violence against women law where discussions take place with the presence of MPs and Ministers.

Ensuring the continuity of its projects, MRA's mission is about keeping the funding and all the work in the field where local NGOs operate. MRA designs projects in collaboration with the NGOs, which later get a sub-grants from MRA when the project is accepted after being rigorously evaluated. Besides the sub-grants, MRA also receive donations from the British Embassy in Rabat, US Middle East Partnership Initiative, Norway Embassy and Sweden Embassy, among others. (Evrard, 2014)) discusses how the survival of numerous associations is dependent on the external funding they receive from 'European and North American embassies and

NGOs'. Receiving the grants and other types of funding for the projects, requires that organizations such as MRA, provide reports detailing how the funds were utilized and, how the outcomes mentioned in the project proposal compare to the outcomes attained in the field, among many other details. Such reports are meant to allow for visibility and transparency in terms of the benefits for the beneficiaries.

MRA's assessment of the impact of their work on the NGOs and the women is based on 4 main domains of change as mentioned in a book chapter addressing legal empowerment programs in Morocco and Tunisia: Content outcomes or changes in written laws and policies. Structure outcomes, or changes in local actors', NGOs', and public institutions' procedures, operations, systems, resources, knowledge, skills, and capacities to effectively implement written law and policies. Culture outcomes, or changes in public knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, practices, and behaviors. Relationship outcomes, or changes in current hierarchical power relationships among people and institutions based on gender, age, socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, and geography, are consistent with human rights principles (Bordat and Kouzzi, 2017).

Relying on the characteristics of the four main domains of assessment's results, MRA realizes that sometimes the work might not be fully accomplished and requires more improvement of the connections between what they offer to NGOs and what the latter contribute to in their communities in terms of compatibility. In a sense, the idea is about not so much controlling the organizations, but about examining whether they are fulfilling their end of the bargain in terms of helping improve women's situation in their respective areas, be it rural or urban.

After examining how both women's organizations operate, it seems that MRA work follows a more structured plan compared to UAF. MRA's website attests to that, where details about the projects, the partners, the reports and the approach followed among others are all displayed in a cohesive way and are easily accessible. UAF on the other hand, seem to be unable to live up to its legacy of being one of the first women's organizations, which as indicated before, can be largely linked to how funding is controlled and how UAF carries itself nowadays in comparison to the past.

Comparison and Observations

MRA's structured approach contrasts with UAF's challenges in sustaining its legacy. While UAF has pioneered significant reforms, its limited capacity for systematic evaluation and reliance on short-term funding has hindered its impact. In comparison, MRA's focus on collaboration, transparency, and rigorous assessment mechanisms positions it as a model for effective advocacy. As Bordat and Kouzzi (2017) noted, evaluating changes in societal and institutional structures is crucial for long-term success.

Ultimately, UAF's historical achievements underscore its importance in Morocco's women's rights movement, but adapting to contemporary challenges will require greater emphasis on sustainability and transparency. MRA's comprehensive framework offers valuable lessons for enhancing the effectiveness of women's organizations in advancing gender equality.

5. Conclusion

Dealing with the struggles and the hardships that women face has, throughout the years proven to be a difficult process. Women's organizations have worked tirelessly to ensure that women's social, legal, political and economic situation is improved. Organizations such as UAF and MRA are among the women's organizations that base their mission and goals towards improving women's situation by carrying out different projects, starting from sensitization/awareness campaigns regarding women's rights, creating income-generating projects, legal accompaniment especially with women dealing with domestic violence among other forms of discrimination. Ensuring that these projects are fruitful and have long-term benefits, requires having a source of constant funding as well as a rigorous form of assessment. Two main elements that might not be available at all times, and if available, they might not always be handled in the best way possible.

The interviews conducted allowed for an initial examination of these two aspects, among other elements. As such, though UAF has showcased a glorious self in the past, currently, this does not seem to be the case. MRA, however, as a fairly 'younger' international women's organization, compared to UAF, demonstrated that it is very much able to create projects collaboratively with local NGOs, provide them with the necessary funding and assess the compatibility between the initial objectives and what is achieved on the ground.

6. Recommendations for Future Work

To enhance the evaluation of the initiatives implemented by UAF and MRA, future research should incorporate the perspectives of project beneficiaries. Understanding whether these beneficiaries perceive and experience the positive changes promised at the inception of the projects will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and long-term impact of these efforts.

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