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POVERTY IN RURAL AREAS: WOMEN'S ROLES AND STRATEGIES TO FACE THE DIFFICULT LIVING CONDITIONS: RESULTS OF AN INVESTIGATION CARRIED OUT IN THE COMMUNE OF HADJ MECHERI

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Abstract - The constraints to which rural women are confronted, in the scattered zones of Algeria, persist, particularly for those living in steppe areas, which are suffering from the scarcity of the natural resources, and in particular water resources. This situation is being worsened by the weight of the traditions which exclude women from almost all the education as well as the access to the resources. Nevertheless, changes are happening in these rural territories, as a consequence of the enormous efforts of the women who still continue inventing strategies and deploying any necessary mean to improve the financial conditions of their home. But, they especially try to gain more autonomy in spite of their low educational level and to their scarce know-how, limited exclusively to the agricultural activity and the local crafts.

Key words: Steppe, rural women, gender, Algeria.

INTRODUCTION

In rural steppe areas, women still face a multitude of difficulties which restrict them in their fight against hunger and misery. The weight of the traditions contributes considerably in keeping the state of women insecurity while excluding them from education, land right, water, and even from the incomes they earn. Nevertheless, a form of questioning the established laws is taking place. In fact, women try to find means which help them facing the traditions.

What are, hence, these strategies and new behaviours developed by women - dominated and without any real decision power - in order to improve their living conditions?

Going beyond the regular difficulties, steppe women innovate by finding alternatives to the economic uncertainty through their hard work, which is unfortunately to the detriment of their health.

Since always, rural women contribute largely to households' income; however, they don't have the power over whatever they earn. Actually, they intend to benefit from the initiatives they take; they seek more autonomy so that they could satisfy their new needs, imposed by the changes, the consequences of the recent sedentarisation (thirty last years) of the formerly nomadic families.

STUDY AREA

The commune of Hadj Mechri is in a steppe zone. It is located in the central part of the Saharian Atlas. It belongs to the division of Laghouat, daïra de Brida. It occupies an area of 65.270 ha and is located between 33° 51' and 34°07' of Northern latitude and 1° 20' and 1° 44' of longitude East.

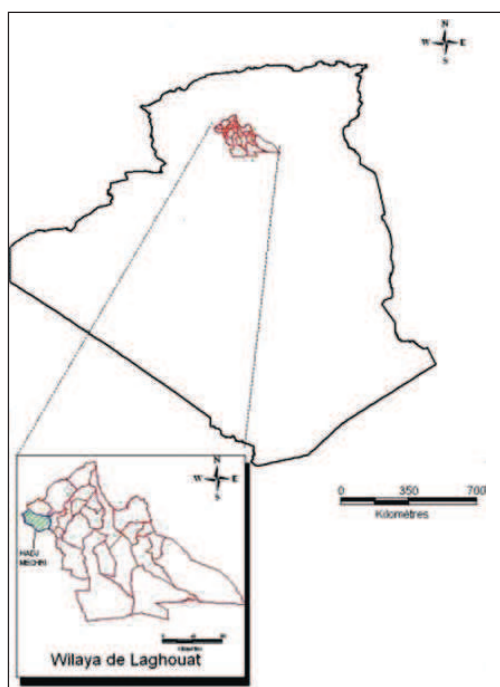


Fig. 1. Localization of the study area

Population of Hadj Mechri

The population of Hadj Mechri knew a relatively low demographic growth during the last fifteen years. It passed from 5.677 inhabitants in 1987 to 6.704 inhabitants in 2004. Seeking the official authorities is often left as a last solution for the resolution of the problems which cannot be solved by the local traditional authorities (Djemaa, a sort of council made of notables of the douars, well know persons and representatives of the religious authorities, such as mosque, and Zaouia).

Hadj Mechri is a recent agglomeration created in the 1970s' around an agricultural village.

Socio-Economic Infrastructures

The study area is equipped with a health centre and three treatment rooms, however not very well distributed within the region, as the distance and the wedged character of the scattered zones accentuate the problem of access to the health services.

Within the commune, there is a college and a primary school located at the main town and two primary schools located the scattered zones. The rate of education is increasing, going from 21% in 1989 to 64% in 2004.

Table 1. Evolution of the education (1989 - 2005)

Year	Population	Sex		Total
		Female	Masculine	
1989	Really educated	106	241	347
	Potentially educatable	850	842	1692
	Rate	12,47	28,62	20,50
1997	Really educated	278	421	699
	Potentially educatable	691	647	1338
	Rate	39,22	65,07	52,24
2004	Really educated	407	827	1234
	Potentially educatable	778,5	1096,5	1875
	Rate	52,28	75,42	63,85

Source: Division of Education, Laghouat, 2005.

To this, it is important to mention the fact that most of the houses are not supplied with electricity and potable water.

Employment

The major occupation (more than 71% of the employed population) is concentrated in the agro-pastoralism activities. Nevertheless, droughts as well as the demographic pressure are accentuating the rate of unemployment which highly increased between 1997 and 2004 passing from 32% to 53% respectively. The national programmes are not able to cope with these rates, and are even worst for women case as female employment is still limited to the education sector.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

Life under a tent is able to offer only a limited number of life-needs. The fact of changing the life style (settlement in houses), implied the development of new needs such as an increase in domestic water use, more hygiene needs, etc., needs that are not always being satisfied. Women thus show ingeniousness to try and satisfy the required needs, which are unfortunately insufficiently filled as men have the control over their incomes. They carry out many activities, not only within the household but also most of the agricultural tasks for which, unfortunately, they do not perceive any remuneration: lambs weaning, hand milking of ewes and the goats,¹ milk by-products transformation (butter, cheese), washing and weaving of wool,² and various potteries activities. Of course, in addition to the hygiene of the family members, especially the young children and the old persons, women deal also with all the house works as well as taking care of the sick members of the family. As, in general, the households are big (about 8 persons), while the income is limited, women must save as much as possible: save wood for heating, and use it just for cooking and during the cold steppe winters. However, these limitations are carried out on the detriment of the personal hygiene of the children and the adults.

When women have a private well, in general it is not well constructed and as consequence, water has a high content of soil particles, causing health problems (renal colic, requiring surgery).

The fact that all the individuals belong to the same "Arch" (tribe), pushes the men to a more authoritarianism; women are found in a situation of smothering, prevented from going outside the home, forbidden to working, they have just to keep themselves busy with some the daily occupations.

A brief description of the socio-economic indicators of the study area highlights the strong proportion of illiterate women (75%), even among the young people (19 - 29 years). Boys education seems to be easier, because, culturally the heads of household refuse to send their daughters to schools located faraway from the family residence; the only possible solutions are either to have recourse to the transportation services (expensive and not always available) or to leave them with some family members living in the urban areas.

The father gives himself the right to forbid his daughters to attend the school or to exclude them at a certain age. The girls do not seem to possess any decisional capacity and appear subjected to the "power on" described by Caubergs who defines the power as "the way of *making choices*".³

Thus, the polygamy was a long time accepted by the women themselves as it consists in a way of sharing the domestic works and the agricultural activities.

Concerning the inheritance, especially the lands of the ancestors, is strictly forbidden for them to have their share, in order to safeguard lands right within the family. As a consequence, women are not willing to develop intensive agricultural activities on their own lands.⁴

¹ Lasts from spring till the end of the summer, twice a day (early in the morning before grazing and late in the evening).

² Different articles are produced (carpets, blankets, pillow, etc.) and take sometimes even 6 years of work.

³ "power on": "the concept assumes that power exists in a limited quantity, the more you have, the less I have [...] it's a power exerted over someone."

⁴ This traditional practice is disappearing with the expansion of a True Islam as in the sacred Book, both Men and Women have to right to the inheritance.

STRATEGIES DEVELOPED BY WOMEN

In order to cope with these problems, women try some adaptation measures to improve their well-being. They assert themselves through the creation of an informal network, strictly feminine, of marketing of the handcrafted articles. This idea makes a reference to the concept of *"power with"* who remains strictly social and where female solidarity takes all its value.

The mutual aid confers to these women a certain power which enables them to achieve a common goal to all of them: overcoming the constraints. In fact, through this network women are the producers and sellers of the products and as a consequence, they maintain their control over the earned money, while, in the past, men were always able to confiscate the money as they were the sellers.

The acquisition of the know-how, even if it is complicated, is among their main objectives; they are always worried about any new mean of subsistence, such as embroidery, crochet, as well as the hand made couscous. In this case, women try to sell their products during the occasions of meetings and family visits.

All women hope so much to be able to earn enough money on their own in order to avoid depending on their husbands, so that to the question *"what are you ready to do to improve your family income?"*, more than 70% gave the same answer: *"anything"*.

The only university found in the study area tries the awareness and persuasion as tools to overcome the resistance of the heads of households and their desire of emancipation.

Whereas in the past, women never took the initiative nor constituted a strong position when it comes to making proposals, today this is becoming more and more frequent. They try to leave the rural areas and escape their tough realities in order to improve their living conditions, to give their children (especially the girls) more chance of education, and to cut off with a system of subsistence which hardly leaves prospects for going beyond the poverty.

They believe undoubtedly that the success of their children through education is an evident solution to leave misery. *"In a society where women are traditionally dependent and considered lower (initial equilibrium), there will be reticence to provide the girls with education, but if they are in a significant number (through the intervention of social and institutional changes), the prescribed roles of respect and submission of women with regards to men are certainly affected". "May be the men will seek to maintain their traditional dominant position? May be they will see through the advantages they can draw from the educated women ?"* (Coloh, 2001).

The low situation of women (compared to men) is not the consequence of their lack of competence or knowledge with respect to men. They are, in fact, perfectly conscious of the external environment; they know in particular all the techniques and activities practised by men, they easily describe all the causes of land degradation, all the activities related to animal husbandry, the distribution of land between the family members and the mechanisms which govern them. In spite of that, they remain generally excluded from the important decisions and they cannot contribute to the resolution of the conflicts between families and in the community. But things are changing and women's conditions too. Through time, women without any help, succeeded in saving enough money to buy wool, then to make a carpet to resell it at higher prices, trying their best to fight poverty. This case seems to be the beginning of a social disruption which was described by LOCOH, which thinks that *"the standards and beliefs, the prescribed roles and attitudes, are not, of course, entirely fixed. They evolve in their setup, in their transmission, which is done from one generation to the other"*.

CONCLUSION

The results of the investigation approach parameters related to the environmental, economic and social contexts in which women try to evolve overcoming the endogenous "rules" imposed by restrictive behaviours resulting from the traditional heritage.

The degradation of the natural resources and its consequences on the income offers, paradoxically, possibilities of emancipation to completely submitted women, to stand-up in the social

hierarchy, by generating new incomes to the rural households. They are grouped in small networks, they seek new knowledge to make and new crenels of activity, with which they hope they could get autonomy and decisional power.

Like the women of North, the situation of women in the South starts to undertake a process of changes concerning the traditions. "The relationship between gender, at individual or collective level, will be differently lived and the system of initial gender will be, in a way or in another, recomposed, redefined" (Coloh, 2001).

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