

Gender and women's self-employment in the Moroccan context of rural cooperatives

 Sara Damou^{1*}, Meryem Harmaz²,  Ben Ahmed Hougua³, Ahmed Aftiss⁴

¹Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco; sara.damou@usmba.ac.ma (S.D.).

²EDVANTIS Higher Education group, Morocco; Meryem.harmaz@usmba.ac.ma (M.H.).

³Political Law and Political Science at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco; benahmed.hougua@usmba.ac.ma (B.A.H.).

⁴Management Sciences at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco; ahmed.aftiss@usmba.ac.ma (A.A.).

Abstract: In Morocco, the participation of rural women in socio-economic life is not only a matter of human rights but also a social benefit to be gained through the development of their skills and talents. Cooperatives are recognized and recommended worldwide as a model for supporting women economically and socially, reducing gender inequalities, and fostering local development through their economic contributions. The aim of this study is to examine the effects of women's cooperatives on rural women's self-employability and gender inequalities. At the same time, we move beyond a macroeconomic perspective to a social and relational one, through the subjective and concrete experiences of Moroccan women's cooperatives. To this end, we used a qualitative methodology based on snowball sampling to collect data on the ways and degrees to which members experience an improvement in their employability after joining cooperatives, drawing on the real-life narratives of women from rural backgrounds. The study reveals that cooperatives enable women to create their own employment opportunities, strengthening their economic and social independence and their ability to support themselves and their families. Although cooperatives do not have a direct and immediate effect on gender inequalities, they do at least help to reduce them to some extent. Inequalities remain influenced by cultural legacies and traditional norms in rural areas, which are difficult to change even after women have achieved financial and social independence.

Keywords: *Economic independence, Gender inequalities, Rural women, Self-employability, Social empowerment, Women's cooperatives.*

1. Introduction

Compared to men, rural women face many challenges that limit their participation in the economy due to the social barriers they encounter. These women find themselves socially marginalized and isolated from the outside world. Because they are economically non-productive and have no income to survive, they depend on their husbands and/or fathers to support them. In fact, these women are perceived in rural areas as incapable of generating an income, which leads them being entrusted with domestic tasks and childcare.

In addition, rural areas are generally characterized by rigid social norms, structural inequalities and institutional barriers that often restrict women's economic opportunities. Social norms dictate that they are obliged to devote all their time to household management and not to work, regarding them as inactive, incapable and subordinate. Such ideas reinforce unfavorable attitudes towards the employability and empowerment of rural women.

To face these challenges, many women want to achieve economic and financial independence. However, the majority of these women are illiterate and often encounter difficulties in finding suitable

employment due to the need to reconcile work and family obligations. In this context, self-employability presents itself as a promising voice for rural women seeking employment opportunities and inclusion in the workforce.

The cooperative represents an opportunity that offers rural women the chance to create and manage their own projects in a specifically female socio-economic environment, as well as to earn an income in communities that previously did not tolerate women's work outside of unpaid agricultural work in family farms. These cooperatives are not just economic structures, but a fundamental pillar of social change and mental support that enables women to focus on their area of expertise in the practice of their own profession and increase their self-confidence. This reduces low self-efficacy and fosters a climate of collective, supportive work.

However, the persistence of traditional social norms and discriminatory gender practices hinders women's path to economic and social emancipation, often keeping them in secondary domestic roles in society. Consequently, understanding and exploring the challenges faced by women in their quest for self-employability, and the role played by cooperatives in this process, presents a fundamental element in promoting gender equality and enhancing women's personal and professional development.

This study aims to explore the role of women's cooperatives in stimulating the self-employability of women living in rural areas, and in establishing gender equality within professional and personal life. Focusing on the relational and social context, which goes beyond the macro-economic perspective. Our aim is to understand the factors that led these women to choose self-employability through cooperatives, and how this initiative promotes gender equality. This will be examined through the concrete and subjective experiences of women's cooperatives in rural areas, identifying the challenges faced and opportunities offered to achieve gender equity.

2. Literature Review

The subject of women's employability has been widely studied in many contexts. There is an abundance of work on various thematic dimensions.

In this literature review, we will be collecting literature that focuses solely on cooperatives from a gender perspective, in particular women's trajectories and subjective experiences within socio-economic cooperatives and their contribution to gender equality and rural women's self-employability.

Let's start with Gidarakou [1] who studied the social division of labor and organizational changes in rural areas, reducing the professional status of rural women to the traditional agricultural-based profession. This study was carried out via a survey of 1459 Greek women farmers, which revealed that empowerment of agricultural women requires their own employment, the acquisition of a professional identity and professional consolidation. This was confirmed by Maksimović, et al. [2] which aims to demonstrate the impact of associations on self-employment in rural areas to achieve gender equality. This study is done through quantitative research on a sample of 420 women from 10 villages in the Serbian enclave of Sirinicka Zupa in Kosovo and Metohija using a questionnaire. The results of the study showed that business start-up, business conditions and support from women's associations were the main factors influencing women's self-employment empowerment. Similarly, Basnet [3] has conducted a study with the main objective of identifying the contribution of cooperatives to the economic, socio-cultural and political aspects of women's empowerment in Nepal. The study is based on a descriptive and analytical method, using secondary data collected from various national and international research articles. The main findings highlight the positive role of cooperatives in women's empowerment in various respects. Women members of cooperatives are empowered in their economic activities, maintain social relationships, reduce gender disparities and participate in social, cultural and political programs.

Joshi [4] examined the extent to which women members of cooperatives in Sudurpaschim province feel empowered in their lives after joining the cooperatives. The study uses a qualitative approach, listening to the real-life testimonies of women from a variety of socio-economic and political backgrounds. The results underline that women in these cooperatives feel economically,

psychologically, socially and organizationally autonomous, despite societal and governmental restrictions. Studies have shown that self-employability enables women to have a working life in order to avoid the stigma associated with housewives, which is often frowned upon [5].

Esteban Salvador, et al. [6] analyzed the contribution of women's cooperatives in promoting women's employment and sustainable development in disadvantaged areas. The study uses a qualitative approach through interviews with women who play a key role in selected cooperatives in the province of Teruel to gather data on their perceptions and experiences of rural development and cooperativism. The main conclusions of the study are that cooperatives have had a positive impact on local employment, and have been seen as a means of promoting the social and economic inclusion of women in rural areas, by offering them employment opportunities and improving their working conditions. Also, the study by Kızıldağ [7] based on the evaluation of women's cooperative samples within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals in Turkey. Women's cooperatives in Turkey are seen as an opportunity for women's employment, particularly in regions with traditional labor market structures. They contribute to sustainable development objectives and job creation for women. Women's self-employability is often recognized as a solution for improving women's living conditions [8].

However, El Aarroumi and Oulhadj [9] focus on the relationship between women's cooperatives and their communities, underlining the importance of governance for their growth and sustainability through a conceptual approach. These authors focus on the experience of discrimination faced by women in various countries, particularly in the Third World. Thus, its impact on their living conditions and their integration into socio-economic development. The results underline the need for a specific governance model and conceptual framework for women's cooperatives, to define them as community-based cooperatives that strive to improve the socio-economic situation of disadvantaged women within the framework of their realities. The research by Maria, et al. [10] looks at the factors influencing women's involvement in cooperatives, using a mixed-methods approach on 264 Spanish cooperatives. The results showed that certain factors are linked to women's perception of their suitability for cooperative principles (cooperation, democratic management and equal participation, primacy of people over capital and access to education), as well as to their effects (quality of working relationships, adaptation to individual circumstances and financial needs). In other words, women's involvement in cooperatives would have the effect of closing the gender gap.

Another strand of literature focuses on the impact of rural women's self-employability in the cooperative context on gender equality. In this context, Kornginnaya [11] has analyzed Asian cooperative models and their contribution to gender equality within an analytical framework. She argues that gender-sensitive Asian cooperatives have made a significant contribution to gender equality through their collaborative efforts with international development entities, government commitment and the support of the cooperative movement. In addition, cooperative members have demonstrated resilience and competitiveness in the marketplace.

In the same sense, cooperatives contribute to an improvement in gender relations between cooperators and their partners, as shown by Burchi and Vicari [12] through a study of the impact of cooperative membership on household decision-making and gender equality in Brazil, via qualitative and quantitative methods using regression and propensity score matching techniques. The study revealed that members of the Coppalj cooperative in Brazil have a higher capacity to participate in household decisions and to share decisions with their partners than non-members. The results also highlighted the important role played by this cooperative in promoting gender equality, particularly in domestic gender relations.

Lecoutere [13] was also interested in gender equality and women's well-being. She studied the impact of agricultural cooperative membership on women's empowerment in Uganda, through focus group discussions with female and male members of an agricultural cooperative society. The results prove that cooperative membership has a significant positive impact on women's capabilities, decision-making power and economic well-being, indicating that cooperatives can make a difference in bridging gender gaps. On the other hand, the division of domestic labor within the household has not changed,

and remains unfavorable to women. Interestingly, the results of a study by Judith [14] on the role of women's cooperatives in the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania in promoting women's economic upliftment and their influences on gender equality and relations were revealing. The study was based on a qualitative exploratory approach, utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with women cooperative members and their spouses. The study concludes that the capabilities acquired through women's cooperatives contribute to women's empowerment, but they do not significantly improve gender relations.

Değirmenci [15] involves a critical approach, fieldwork and empirical data analysis to discuss the evaluation of women's cooperatives in Turkey and their impact on gender inequality. The results of this research suggest that the evaluation of women's cooperatives should not be based solely on economic indicators, it must consider the sociological aspect among the success and performance criteria of women's cooperatives in Turkey through their experiences, their contributions to gender equality and women's empowerment.

In the Moroccan context, a number of empirical studies have also verified the contribution of women's cooperatives to the self-employability of rural women and the reduction of gender inequalities. For example, Bouhazzama and Guenaoui [16] used a qualitative, case-study approach to analyze the management of women's cooperatives in Morocco and the cultural dimension of management from the point of view of those involved. The results of semi-structured interviews conducted with 5 all-female cooperatives located in remote rural areas of Morocco reveal that, despite a high illiteracy rate, the cooperatives have succeeded in developing their own professions within social enterprises and increasing their sales while emphasizing human values, good faith and sustainability, which are essential to long-term success. The research by Unger, et al. [17] was conducted using a questionnaire. This study proves, in the Moroccan context of a village in the Souss-Massa region, that work in argan cooperatives is associated with a better socio-psychological situation for women compared to those who are not employed.

The study by Omari and Elkandoussi [18] examines the role and potential impact of adopting management practices consistent with sustainable development on the community, environment, competitiveness and prosperity of women's argan cooperatives. This study is based on a survey of argan cooperatives in the Souss-Massa-Drâa region of Morocco. It showed that argan cooperatives have achieved positive social, economic and environmental results for rural Moroccan women in the study region, while highlighting certain difficulties that hinder the achievement of the cooperatives' objectives. Moroccan cooperatives enjoyed success with the launch of the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH). As shown by Ibourek and Amaghous [19] in their study through a micro econometric analysis that mobilized individual data from 1512 women's cooperatives. The results showed that the implementation of INDH1 not only contributed to the growth of women's cooperatives, but also significantly reduced the inactivity rate among women.

In addition, the study by Wafae and Sara [20] employed a qualitative approach, notably through semi-structured interviews with women from the Chichaoua region, particularly from the Assif El Mal area, to explore the challenges facing rural women's cooperatives. The results showed that despite efforts to promote gender equality and inclusion, rural women's cooperatives face a variety of challenges, including lack of education, self-esteem, governance, management, financing, support, marketing and relations with their environment.

The above-mentioned literature highlights the favorable impacts of cooperatives on women's well-being, financial independence and empowerment, focusing mainly on financial aspects that examine the various means of financing and their contributions to the success of these entities. Yet few studies pay sufficient attention to the social dimensions, including the gender perspective that can be observed at both household and community level in assessing the success of women's cooperatives. Similarly, there is little literature on the relationship between rural women's self-employability through the creation of women's cooperatives and improved gender relations. This limitation has led to further criticism of the

effectiveness of women-only cooperatives in making rural women self-employable and in promoting improvements in gender relations.

From this perspective, we took the initiative of conducting this study to examine the influence of women's cooperatives on rural women's self-employability and gender equality, based on the relational and social dimensions of rural women's subjective experiences within Moroccan women's cooperatives.

3. Research Methods

This is a qualitative study that seeks to understand the impact of women cooperatives on the self-employment of women and gender equality. It proposes to analyze data collected in the field through interviews. The population of this study is made up of women founders of exclusively women's cooperatives in rural areas of the Fès Meknès region of Morocco. The interviews focused on the reasons why rural women have opted for self-employability through cooperatives, and their perceived role in promoting gender equality.

A dynamic snowball sampling process was adopted. This meant that inclusion criteria were frequently revised to better match the demographic characteristics of those previously interviewed. Thus, the sample size was not determined in advance. Sampling continued until data saturation was reached. Consequently, interviews continued until no new or important information could be gained.

The sample consisted of 12 rural women with women's cooperatives. The following table summarizes some statistics on the respondents and their cooperatives. Ages ranged from 42 to 60. Respondents had varying levels of education, with some women being illiterate. The majority of respondents were married, with some single and divorced. They were informed of the consequences of disclosing information and were asked to give informed consent after being assured of confidentiality.

In this empirical study, we used the biographical method, derived from grounded theory and widely adopted in qualitative studies. Grounded theory focuses on theories that emerge naturally from the data, rather than preconceived ideas. In this way, the interviewees have more control to tell their story. The interviews with the women were semi-structured, starting with basic questions about their cooperative and the choice of self-employability. All participants answered the same questions about their motivations, the financial and social effects of the cooperative on women, and gender equality. The interviews were recorded by phone with the consent and knowledge of the interviewees. Each interview lasted almost 45 minutes in Arabic, and was transcribed and translated. Then, after multiple readings of the transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the data, we proceeded to coding according to interesting characteristics of the data. After grouping the codes, we opted for a thematic analysis to identify and validate the main themes. Finally, we defined and named the themes by adding data extracts. The themes were divided into three levels according to their specificity: Self-employability of rural women through the creation of women's cooperatives, Social and personal transformation of rural women through self-employability within women's cooperatives and Gender roles, and challenges of women's self-employability in rural cooperatives.

Table 1.
Characteristics of women surveyed.

Presidents	Family status	Age	Level of education	Cooperative activity	Number of cooperative members
Karima	Married with children	58 years old	1st year Baccalaureate	Pastry and Bakery	3
Malika	Married with children	52 years old	3rd year college	Crafts (Distillation of aromatic and medicinal plants and manufacture of cosmetics)	5
Aziza	Divorced with children	49 years old	Primary	Craft industry (Production of cereals, couscous and essential oils)	8
Bouchra	Married with children	56 years old	3rd year college	Handicrafts (A traditional sewing workshop)	5
Zohour	Married with children	60 years old	Bachelor's degree	Agricultural (production of vinegars and olive-based products)	10
Majida	Married with children	48 years old	1st year college	Handicrafts (traditional sewing workshop)	5
Anissa	Married with children	45 years old	Basics (Reading and writing)	Pastry (traditional breads and cakes)	6
Laila	Divorced with children	45 years old	Illiterate	Handicrafts (sewing workshop)	4
Ilham	Divorced	47 years old	1st year of high school	Handicrafts (sewing workshop)	8
Fatima	Single	53 years old	Primary	Crafts (traditional carpets)	10
Fatima	Married with children	42 years old	License	Agricultural (vinegar production and essential oils)	7
Nezha	Married with children	46 years old	Illiterate	Craft	6

4. Findings

In this section, we present a detailed description of the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data collected in the field.

4.1. Theme 1: Self-Employability of Rural Women through the Creation of Women's Cooperatives

4.1.1. Difficult Socio-Economic Context for Rural Women

A common phenomenon observed in the accounts of most of the women interviewed is that women's self-employability in rural areas through the creation of women's cooperatives is a significant means of addressing the socio-economic challenges these women face. In a context marked by unemployment, poverty, a fragile economy and low job creation, women are looking for concrete, sustainable economic alternatives. Women's cooperatives offer a crucial response to these challenges, providing employment opportunities to generate a stable income and a solid alternative to the economic difficulties of traditional trades such as agriculture. These trades are often marked by drought and climate change. Ms Karima (aged 58 years old) decided to set up her cooperative to support her family. Her husband is a farmer who finds himself in a difficult financial situation due to drought and inflation, which has affected his source of income. She therefore decided to create her own job in order to have an income to support her family. She described her experience as follows:

"In the beginning, my husband worked in agriculture, but in recent years, we've barely been able to survive, and we can no longer meet the basic needs of our little family. So, I started looking for what I could do to save my family. I wanted to work, but job opportunities are very rare in our region, and this is the case for many women in my community, who want to work, but unfortunately there are no job offers except those we can create for ourselves like the cooperative or an entrepreneurial project. So, I

took the initiative to create my own job by setting up cooperatives to guarantee my family's financial wellbeing.

On the other hand, many of the women interviewed had gone through very difficult periods in their lives, such as divorce, loss of a loved one and similar hardships, which prompted them to turn their pain into inspiration by creating their own jobs. Malika (52 years old), founder of the cooperative "the feminine touch", commented on her self-employment in the following terms:

"I had a disabled daughter who died at the age of 22, and I spent my whole life taking care of her. I couldn't get over the pain of her loss, so I created my cooperative to turn my grief into a source of positive inspiration and help women in my community find jobs and have a stable income."

Cooperatives also promote the socio-economic inclusion of rural women who are marginalized either because of illiteracy or limited skills. For example, Laila (45 years old), owner of the women's cooperative "The Free Woman", shared her reasons for opting for self-employability by launching her own traditional sewing cooperative:

"I'm an illiterate woman, I found it difficult to find a job that suited my situation, despite job-hunting efforts in my area which are very rare and require reading and writing skills that unfortunately I didn't possess at the time. Faced with this situation, I decided to opt for self-employability and create my own project. By launching my cooperative, I can use my skills in a way that suits my abilities, while facing the challenges arising from my illiteracy."

In addition, self-employability for rural women is a solution where restrictive traditional norms limit women's mobility to work outside their communities. These constraints push women to create employment opportunities on their own through cooperatives, without having to leave their family and social environment. This is also why Ms Nezha (45 years old) has opted for self-employability. In her words:

"My daughter graduated from traditional industry, but given the traditions of our region, she couldn't leave the community to work in the city. For this reason, we considered creating our own employment by setting up our women's cooperative "the creative girl", which seemed to be a suitable solution, offering my daughter, the community women and myself an opportunity to deploy our common skills, promote local job offers, while respecting the customs of our community".

Financial independence thanks to a stable income is of crucial importance to these women, enabling them to overcome financial difficulties and free themselves from economic dependence on third parties. For Ms. Majida (48 years old), president of the "Fingers of Femininity" cooperative, self-employment encourages her to achieve both financial autonomy and independence from others. She declares:

"From a young age, I've always had this aversion to someone giving me money to fund my needs. It's something that has persisted throughout my life. Before I got married, I worked with my father on his farm; once I was married, I decided to set up my own cooperative that would enable me to earn a stable income, to maintain financial independence from my husband."

4.1.2. Dynamics of Cooperation, Solidarity and Self-Assertion in Women, Overcoming the Gender Inferiority Complex

Analysis of the interviews highlights a fundamental difference between the autonomous approach of individual entrepreneurship and cooperatives emphasizing collaborative work between members to achieve common goals and generate collective socio-economic benefits.

According to the interviews, solidarity within cooperatives translates into mutual support, collaboration and the valuing of each cooperative member's contribution. This fosters an environment where women feel supported and encouraged, promoting their personal and professional development. What's more, cooperatives are more than just a place to work, they are seen by rural women as a place to meet and exchange experience, skills and create lasting social bonds. This was confirmed by Ms Majida, who gave the following reason:

"I started out as a traditional sewing entrepreneur, with several village women working with me from their homes. Each woman took charge of a specific part of the work until the final piece was made.

Their work was very important to the final product. However, I felt sorry for these talented women who worked in the shadows, and their valuable contribution to the work goes unrecognized. For this reason, I decided to create a women's cooperative to value and recognize their true contribution to the work, as well as to promote a sense of belonging and solidarity among them."

In addition, cooperatives offer flexible organizational structures and working arrangements that adapt to the needs and constraints of members in rural areas. This flexibility is aligned with the social and cultural norms of the region, promoting acceptance of rural women's work within cooperatives, while preserving social and cultural harmony and guaranteeing better integration of women into the local socio-economic fabric. For example, Ms Zohour (60 years old), founder of the " The olive flower " cooperative, explained her reasons for opting for self-employability through the establishment of the cooperative as follows:

"The cooperative provides an exceptional working environment compared to other jobs, offering a flexible schedule that allows both work and family responsibilities to be reconciled. This flexibility is in harmony with social requirements and local norms, allowing women to effectively manage their family responsibilities, while working within the cooperative."

4.2. Theme 2: Social and Personal Transformation of Rural Women Through Self-Employability in Women's Cooperatives

4.2.1. Financial Autonomy, Empowerment and Social Upgrading for Cooperative Women

The interviews with the women show that access to women's cooperatives is a platform for self-employability, where women can showcase their skills and talents. This experience is more than just a job offer, it's a real source of personal development.

But the ultimate aim of creating and integrating cooperatives is to achieve financial autonomy, a goal widely shared by the women interviewed. Earning a stable income by working within the cooperatives makes women feel valued, and helps them to provide for their families and improve their quality of life. This financial stability provides them with essential security, reducing their economic and financial dependence. As a result, they become less vulnerable to external pressures and financial constraints. Majida (48 years old) said:

"As a woman who has created her own job, the main reason is to earn an income that will enable me to meet my own needs and those of my children without depending on anyone else, which eliminates the pressure of having to ask or wait for help from others. In this way, this source of financial autonomy enables us to take charge of our financial needs and meet our expenses, while contributing to a better self-esteem."

Moreover, these women's financial independence improves the quality of their lives and their families in a number of ways. Firstly, it gives them the opportunity to acquire what they want, be it goods, services or experiences. Thanks to their income, they can respond positively to their personal and family needs and desires, which promotes their personal fulfillment and improves their family's overall well-being. Secondly, the income generated by the cooperative enables their families to access essential services such as healthcare, more comfortable housing and quality education for their children, thus minimizing school drop-out and increasing the chances of success in rural areas. Women's financial autonomy also helps to maintain stability within the household, guaranteeing financial security in the face of economic challenges. This observation is confirmed by Ms. Nezha (46 years old), owner of the cooperative " the creative girl ", who declares:

"To be honest, I got married at the age of 18. At that time, I was mainly involved in domestic tasks such as preparing meals, hand-washing clothes and baking bread on a daily basis. Then, since I created my own job which enabled me to generate a stable income, I've been able to invest in significant improvements in my daily life such as household appliances: the bread maker, the washing machine etc. which have largely lightened my household responsibilities. If I had asked my husband to buy me these machines, it would probably have been difficult for him to accept for several reasons. On the one hand,

financial constraints, and on the other, being a housewife, it could have been perceived as an additional burden."

Furthermore, women's cooperatives are more than just economic entities for improving the financial situation of rural women, they are engines for strengthening social ties and solidarity between cooperative members by providing a space where women can meet, help each other, share personal experiences and professional skills. This atmosphere of mutual support promotes a sense of belonging, helping them to overcome socio-economic challenges together.

4.2.2. Building Self-Esteem and Empowering Women

Through our interviews with women members of the cooperatives, we observed a significant positive effect on the self-esteem and empowerment of rural women. The testimonies we gathered point to a profound personal transformation marked by an increased self-confidence and a better vision of their own worth. These experiences within the cooperatives reinforce their sense of self-worth, dignity and pride, leading them to feel stronger and more capable of facing the challenges of daily life and overcoming the psychological and social obstacles facing rural women. Ms Aziza (52 years old), founder of the "the feminine touch" cooperative, described the changes in her life brought about by the creation of the cooperative as follows:

"The cooperative is not just a job opportunity, but a driving force for positive change in my life. By creating the cooperative, I was able to find my source of existence and my place in society, actively contributing to my community, my family and myself, and to be recognized for my skills and my work. This recognition has been a key element in boosting my self-esteem and acquiring greater confidence in my abilities and ambitions."

4.2.3. Change of Social Status, Rediscovery of Self and Perception of the Rural Woman

Women's cooperatives play an essential role in redefining the traditional image of rural women in society. This image, which confines the rural woman to the role of a housewife, focused on domestic chores and child-rearing, is shifting to one where she is seen as a key economic and social player in her community. Membership of these cooperatives completely changes the way society perceives rural women, transforming them from passive figures to drivers of socio-economic change. This gives them a sense of value and social recognition. Ms Majida (48 years old) said:

"There has been an admirable evolution in the perception of women today, from the shy, naïve woman, guided by her husband and marginalized by society, to a strong, inspiring woman who believes in herself and her abilities, and enjoys a privileged social status. The cooperative is a means of building an image and a social identity based on personal and professional accomplishment that goes beyond the traditional role of the rural woman".

By sharing their experiences and success within the cooperatives, these women encourage other members and other women in the community to follow their example by creating their own jobs, thereby changing social norms and contributing to a more egalitarian gender vision of employment. By taking an active role in socio-economic life, these women play an essential role in their region. They become essential partners in the progress and improvement of their environment. With this in mind, Ms Malika (52 years old) emphasized:

"I was the first woman to set up a cooperative in my region, which contributed to a transformation in the image of rural women in my area, demonstrating that women are not destined to remain confined to the home, limited to traditional domestic roles, women have the power to work on an equal footing with men, capable of creating their own jobs and leading them successfully. Self-employability is not just a job opportunity and a stable source of income, but also a chance to find our social place and earn the recognition of others."

4.2.4. Economic Security, Commitment, Empowerment and Electoral Representation

Women's cooperatives play an essential role in the political involvement of rural women. Thanks to the self-confidence they gain from working within cooperatives, rural women become aware of their rights, develop a willingness to defend their interests and bring about positive change in their communities. This awareness and willingness translate into a desire to engage in local politics, where they seek to make their voices heard, to represent the needs and aspirations of local women, and to defend their interests. This commitment underlines a remarkable change in the status and influence of rural women, who are becoming powerful agents of economic, social and political change in their region. This is the case of zhour, the founder of the "the olive flower" cooperative, who declared that:

"Through the cooperative, I have closely observed the challenges faced by rural women, but also their capacity, resilience and desire to create their own jobs adapted to their level of education and cultural environment. That's why I decided to get involved in politics, by becoming a municipal councillor, to make women's voices heard and defend our interests and rights. This decision would not have been possible if I hadn't opted for self-employability through the cooperative. This initiative gave me the courage and confidence to get involved in politics to defend women wishing to create their own jobs in the region by promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities and improving the infrastructure of the rural area."

4.3. Theme 3: Gender Roles and the Challenges of Female Self-Employability in Rural Cooperatives

4.3.1. Persistence of Traditional Gender Norms, Symbolic Violence and Female Resistance

Through interviews with rural women, they demonstrated an intentional awareness of the existence of gender disparities in their community, but tended to do so automatically and without much thought. This finding could have important implications for understanding the cognitive and social mechanisms involved in gender perception and categorization in rural society. It also indicates that this gender inequality is deeply rooted in society, and may occur unconsciously, even among women who are aware of gender equality issues. This gender disparity also seemed as a natural social arrangement, voluntarily accepted by both sexes, especially women who are driven to adhere to these norms by social pressures and family expectations.

In some interviews, female interviewees made it clear that they are not seeking gender equality, and that this is an aspiration far removed from their concerns. This illustrates a tacit acceptance of existing gender norms and their unequal position to men, despite the benefits such as financial independence and enhanced self-esteem gained through their involvement in cooperatives, they deliberately decide to conform to this social arrangement. Ms Bouchra (56 years old), owner of the "lala soukaina of traditional sewing" cooperative, declares that:

"The man must stay a man and the woman must stay a woman, even if I have been able to achieve professional success, I am bound to respect and take care of domestic tasks."

Similarly, Ms Ilham (47 years old) confirms that:

"Gender inequality in the home is a reality known to all women in the community, and it's always the woman who has to take on domestic responsibilities. But it should be noted that the cooperative does not directly target the elimination of gender inequalities within the home, on the contrary, it plays an important role in creating employment opportunities aimed at transforming the traditional image of the woman into a strong, financially independent woman."

Again, Ms. Fatima (53 years old) declared:

"Personally, I'm opposed to strict equality between men and women. I support equality on a professional and political level, but socially, especially in rural areas, I believe in distinct roles for men and women. In our community, the man has his role and the woman has hers. Asking for total equality, whether in society or at home, doesn't seem appropriate according to our upbringing and traditions. That's the way our society works. Also, the cooperative does not aim to promote gender equality. Rather, our priority is to ensure a stable income and financial independence."

We have pointed out that traditional gender norms and social pressures generally dictate specific roles for women within the family and society. These norms often assign women responsibilities such as domestic chores and childcare, while decision-making power is held entirely by men. This unequal division of roles creates a double workload for women, putting enormous stress and pressure on them in their daily lives. As Ms. Fatima Marzouk (42 years old), owner of the "Tadfyoute" cooperative, puts it:

"Thanks to the cooperative, we have been able to achieve gender equality at work and guarantee financial independence. However, if I want to maintain this independence and success, I have to take on all my responsibilities at home before going to work, which is exhausting and requires extra effort as well as enormous stress in our daily lives."

Similarly, rural women face continued resistance to their employability and professional and personal success. This resistance is often associated with a fear on the part of men of losing their power and authority within the household, and the possibility of challenging traditional gender roles deeply rooted in local culture. Men also fear the social transformations brought about by women's financial and personal independence through self-employment in cooperatives. The latter generally lead to changes in men's social status and masculine identity. Ms Ilham shares her point of view as follows:

"Many men are against women's work, it comes down to several reasons: firstly, women's employment is perceived as a potential threat to virility among some men influenced by traditional social norms. Secondly, there are others who are afraid that women will become stronger, more aware of their rights, financially independent thanks to their jobs and their new social status, which creates a fear among men of losing control and traditional gender roles within the home."

4.3.2. Male Pragmatism and the Rationalization of Women's Work

In the course of our interviews, several women confirmed that acceptance of their work depends on a number of factors. On the one hand, men's trust in their wives seems to play a crucial role in this acceptance. This trust manifests itself in the belief that women can work while respecting established social and cultural norms. This means that men are more likely to accept their wives' employment and professional contribution, when they have the assurance that they are acting in accordance with social expectations and traditional community norms, even while performing a professional activity. On the other hand, socio-economic pressures such as poverty, lack of money, family needs that exceed the man's income... When financial difficulties become more severe and financial resources are limited, traditional gender norms may be challenged. In such cases, men may accept their wives' employment in order to contribute financially to the household, even if this contradicts traditional gender-role norms. However, even with this evolution in male perception and the acceptance of women's work, the idea of equal roles within the home is still often dismissed. Domestic roles are defined by strong social norms, making it difficult to challenge pre-established roles in traditional patterns. Ms. Fatima (42 years old) had this to say about her experience:

"My husband encouraged me to set up the cooperative, especially as it's a space exclusively for women, and he supports me because he recognizes the importance of my financial contribution to the household, especially as his income alone isn't enough to meet the family's growing needs and cope with economic difficulties".

Although women's acceptance of work has made remarkable progress, and is seen as a step towards professional equality. But there are still obstacles to be overcome in order to achieve fuller gender equality, especially when it comes to family and household responsibilities, the power to make decisions within the home, and the fair distribution of domestic tasks. With this in mind, Ms Zohor emphasized that:

"No matter how much a woman contributes financially, how successful she is professionally or how prestigious her social status, the man still holds the power in the home."

4.3.3. *The Duality of Women's Roles*

In our interviews, we noted a number of obstacles to the professional fulfillment and success of rural women. Firstly, for some women, their mobility is generally poorly perceived by men. This limits their access to economic opportunities outside their region. Especially married women working in cooperatives often find it difficult to take part in product exhibitions or expand their projects in search of new opportunities, due to the traditional gender roles assigned to them. These roles involve domestic and childcare responsibilities that men cannot assume. This reality thus restricts women's ability to engage in professional activities, reinforcing obstacles to their self-employability and consolidating rigid gender-based social norms.

Moreover, balancing work and family responsibilities is a key challenge for rural women. The lack of support from men in childcare and domestic tasks makes it difficult for women to reconcile their personal and professional lives, thus restricting their opportunities for self-employment and the success of their projects. Ms Aziza (60 years old) says:

"There's still a mentality among some men that if a woman wants to work, she has to fulfill her responsibilities at home (preparing meals, taking care of the children...). In my case, I try to prepare everything at home, which is very tiring and requires a lot of energy."

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the discussion on the influence of self-employability through cooperatives on improving rural women's living conditions and promoting gender equality.

Through this study, we have found that cooperatives play an essential role in empowering women from rural areas facing a number of socio-economic pressures, such as poverty, unemployment, lack of job opportunities, drought and illiteracy. These cooperatives not only offer a simple employment opportunity, but they also represent a space of emancipation where women's potential is enhanced, their skills recognized and their voices heard. Indeed, not only do they enable women to generate a stable income, but they also boost their self-esteem and participation in the economic sphere, while respecting prevailing social norms.

Cooperatives enable women to be included in the socio-economic sphere, offering them employment, financial independence and promoting gender equality at the professional level, whether in terms of income or decision-making. On the other hand, the interviews reveal that gender inequality persists within the home, and that women are aware of this reality but deliberately choose to conform to this unequal position, which is a natural behavioural practice and social arrangement between the sexes. This decision can be explained by a variety of factors, including the region's strict traditional gender norms, the social pressures exerted on women, and men's cultural education on the traditional position and role of a woman. In addition, many women have expressed their fear of losing their jobs if they don't fulfill their domestic responsibilities.

This situation places a double burden on women. On the one hand, women's financial contribution to their family's needs through their income can improve the family's well-being and living conditions. On the other hand, it puts enormous stress and pressure on women to balance work and family life.

In this context, another aspect of the contribution of cooperatives to the employability of rural women is that this structure offers women a more flexible work opportunity than other jobs, thanks to solidarity and cooperation, which helps women find a balance between their family and professional lives.

It is important to note that the cooperative plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality at the professional level, making a significant contribution to rural women's self-employability by challenging traditional gender roles in terms of employment and women's social inclusion in working life. However, the cooperative does not have a direct influence on gender equality within the household, despite women's financial and personal independence. But it is important to emphasize that the cooperative implicitly and indirectly aims to mitigate this unequal position of women and overcome gender inequalities by offering them the opportunity to balance work and family life.

Gender distinction in rural areas can be both unconscious and reflexive. This may mean that this distinction can be the result of both spontaneous processes and conscious reflection. This position of women and men in society is firmly rooted in cultural heritages, which include norms and values handed down over time and are difficult to change.

Firstly, cooperatives enable rural women to become financially independent and boost their self-confidence. Secondly, and in the long term, they can have an influence on gender inequalities in general. Indeed, gender distinctions vary according to context. Observed behaviours, patterns and social arrangements are both the cause and result of existing local cultural gender traditions. Our findings contribute to a strongly contextual understanding of gender inequalities, highlighting the importance of taking contextual and cultural factors into account when analyzing gender inequalities, particularly in rural contexts. And the realization that gender is not always consciously addressed, and requires profound social transformation.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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