The ‘three ages’ of the wives left behind: status, decision-making power and access to resources of Moroccan migrants’ spouses

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**Abstract**

The growing scholarship on women left behind often formulates the hypothesis of an empowerment which may result from male emigration in the context of traditional societies, with very mixed conclusions. Based on interviews with women left behind living a small southwestern Moroccan town in a region of historic emigration to France, this article seeks to further this investigation through considering how migration and remittancesimpact women’s bargaining and decision-making power within the household left-behind. It does so by examining how migration affects what is generally regarded as an enabling factor of women’s empowerment, i.e. the household structure. Based on the women’s life narratives, the analysis shows how women’s power and status changes with time, following the important stages of the domestic cycle and migratory trajectory of their husbands. Mirroring Sayad’s typology of Algerian emigration to France (1977), this article distinguishes between three “ages” of the wife left behind, characterized by different power configurations in the local and transnational households that shape her access to the empowerment benefits of migration. Doing so, ithighlights the many difficulties facing wives left behind, and how migration can contribute in the resilience of the more traditional extended household structure rather than its demise. Overall, this article argue that migration systems predicated on patriarchal social and family order are unlikely to bring about sustainable women’s empowerment in the origin household and community.

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1. **Introduction**

The positive effect of international migration and remittances on the level, depth, and severity of poverty in the developing world is largely evidenced, especially in countries of large-scale emigration, such as Morocco (Adams Jr and Page, 2003). Approaching migration and remittances from a purely economic and financial perspective has however led to a relative neglect of the social and gendered effects of those flows in the origin communities. This lack of attention has been compounded by a bias in the literature towards the behaviour of the migrants at destination. In contrast, the populations left behind are often ignored or portrayed as passive actors and tend to be regarded as an homogenous category of people with little agency (Archambault 2010).

In Morocco, where international labour migration has been predominantly male, women constitute a very large proportion of this left-behind population. In contrast to the female migrant regarded as empowered by her migration to a country of destination associated with an idea of progress and emancipation, women staying behind are seen as powerless, in a society of origin conceived as stagnant and traditional (Moujoud, 2008; Archambault, 2010). Against this idea, research originating from different social science disciplines has focused on the dynamics of change in origin communities and the agency of those left-behind, particularly, the link between male emigration and women’s status and empowerment in origin communities, focusing more specifically on migrant’s wives.

This article explores the hypothesis of female empowerment resulting from male emigration in the context of Morocco, a country characterized by a salient Arab Muslim patriarchal order (Joseph, 1996). It seeks to investigate how migration and remittancesimpact the bargaining and decision-making power of the wives of migrants within the household left-behind, in a region of historic emigration to France. This question is investigated based on qualitative interviews with thirteen women left behind, providing accounts of gendered power dynamics in the household and how migration affects them.

1. **Moroccan emigration and women left behind**

Morocco has become one of the world’s leading emigration countries and international migratory movements have long been an important phenomenon in Morocco's economy and society. Male emigration to Western European countries - France in particular - started during colonial times and intensified after the country's independence in 1956, built up by the recruitment of low-skilled workers to compensate postwar labour shortages, particularly in mining, construction and industry. The mid-70s oil crises put a halt to this economic migration of mostly rural and unskilled men, originating from Berber areas of the Northern Rif, the Southwestern Sous and the Southern oases (Berriane et al., 2015). From the 1980s, international emigration from Morocco continued and feminized through family reunification programmes. It also saw a diversification of destinations (including to Spain and Italy) and of regions of origin, as well as the development of skilled migration on the one hand and illegal on the other. The global Moroccan diaspora is now estimated at around 4 million, with the vast majority of its members residing in Western and Southern Europe (Berriane et al., 2015). Therefore, international migration is a pervasive phenomenon in many Moroccan regions. In the three main historical regions of international emigration, between one fifth to over a half of all households have at least one member who has migrated abroad (de Haas, 2003). Remittances are often a vital lifeline to many of those households.

As international emigration has long been a predominantly male phenomenon, there is a large population of women living in these households. Possibly due to a dearth of information on subsequent waves of migration, the phenomenon of ‘wives left behind’ is mostly associated with the 'classic model of maghrebian migrations' (Berriane and Aderghal, 2008) which spanned from the beginning of the 20th century to the mid-1970s. This model was characterised by the absolute predominance of male migration from clearly defined home regions, the effectiveness of the migratory networks and channels, the poor qualifications of the migrants and a strong attachment to the family and the home society. These migrants' profiles mirrored those of the “first age” of Algerian emigration to France described by Sayad (1977), i.e. men from impoverished peasant societies who were «delegated» by their family or community to emigrate in order to support their kin and further the traditional way of living at origin. These men usually left either freshly married or more often single. In the former case, they left their spouse in care of their parents and in the latter, they tended to have an endogamous marriage arranged by the family during a holiday in the few years after their first migration. Migration was then generally regarded as a temporary livelihood strategy by these men and their families (Barou, 2001), facilitated by the ease of circulation between Europe and Morocco due to the high labour demand in Europe at the time.

When things changed in the 1970s, with the economic crisis and the ensuing halt to labour migration, those who had not yet returned were faced with the options of either continuing living separately from their families or applying for family reunification. Although many chose the latter, others could not or did not want to. The reasons behind the resilience of this transnational family life included the financial and housing conditions posed to apply for reunification, administrative difficulties, the willingness to continue saving the money earned at destination to invest at home in preparation of an eventual return, and the men’s reluctance to bring wife and children in a society that they regarded as hostile to the affirmation of their authority as fathers and husbands (Barou, 2001). Some men, initially opposed to this possibility or constrained by the need to care for elderly parents at origin, eventually applied but did not always succeed because of the increasingly stringent conditions or because it was too late (e.g. their children were over 18, they had invested too much at origin or the family did not want to leave). As a result, many Moroccan migrants, including many retired ones, have been living a transnational family life for decades and continue providing for a wife and children with whom they have only cohabitated during their holidays, usually a month or so during the summer (Hunter, 2011).

The convergence of changing mentalities, decline of the patriarchal extended household, more stringent conditions to emigration and the individualisation of migration strategies mean that this practice of leaving wife and children behind is on the wane. There is nevertheless evidence of a continuation of this practice among more recent male migrants to Spain and Italy (Pennetti, 2006; Eddouada and Anbi, 2014). This is also visible in the sex ratios of households left behind calculated from the 2006-7 Morocco Living Standard Measurement Survey (MLSS): Households with current international migrants present a slight imbalance in favour of female members in both urban and rural areas compared to the non-migrant households. Interestingly, the table also shows larger proportions of three-generation and complex family structures among migrant households, suggesting that they are less concerned by the general trend to household nuclearisation at work in Morocco (Abdelmajid and Benohoud, 2010), a fact that will be discussed below.

Table 1: Household characteristics by Migration Status - 2006-7 MLSS

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **No Migrant (69.2%)** | **Domestic Migrant (16.5%)** | **Current International Migrant (11.6%)** | **Past or Return International Migrant (2.7%)** |
| **URBAN** |
| Sex ratio (N man for 1 woman) | .97 | .81 | .78 | .89 |
| *Household structure: Generations* |
|  One generation  | 10.9 | 7.7 | 11.9 | 14 |
|  Two generations | 77.7 | 69.5 | 66.6 | 69 |
|  Three generations | 11.4 | 22.8 | 21.4 | 17 |
| *Household structure: Family types* |
|  Single headed nuclear | 7.5 | 17.7 | 19.7 | 10.8 |
|  Complete nuclear | 62.8 | 39.9 | 35.7 | 48.1 |
|  Complex | 18.7 | 35.9 | 32.5 | 26.2 |
|  Other | 11 | 6.5 | 12.1 | 14.9 |
| Women 15-54 living with parents-in-law | 11.4 | 26 | 24.8 | 24 |
| **RURAL** |
| Sex ratio (N man for 1 woman) | .99 | .87 | .81 | .82 |
| *Household structure: Generations* |
|  One generation  | 9.3 | 7.7 | 11.3 | 13.3 |
|  Two generations | 69.3 | 61.5 | 56.8 | 48.9 |
|  Three generations | 21.5 | 30.8 | 31.9 | 37.9 |
| *Household structure: Family types* |
|  Single headed nuclear | 4.9 | 12.8 | 6.8 | 1.9 |
|  Complete nuclear | 58.5 | 39.3 | 39.9 | 40.6 |
|  Complex | 27.8 | 40 | 44.4 | 44.9 |
|  Other | 8.7 | 7.9 | 9 | 12.5 |
| Women 15-54 living with parents-in-law | 23.7 | 40.5 | 42.3 | 49.1 |

Source: 2006-7 MLSS – weighted percentages. Author’s analysis.

Different studies have previously looked at women left behind in Morocco, focusing mainly on rural areas and migrant’s wives. They include studies conducted in the Rif (Hajjarabi, 1988, 1995), the Dadès Valley (Aït Hamza, 1995) and the Todgha Valley (Steinmann, 1993; de Haas and van Rooij, 2010). Building on their findings, this study furthers the analysis of the effects of migration on women’s empowerment in the context of an Arab patriarchal society.

1. **Theoretical perspectives on migration and empowerment of wives left behind**

Following Naila Kabeer, empowerment is understood here as *‘the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them’* (1999, p. 437). This term suggests a *process of change* in which women are the agents, not just the beneficiaries. *Agency* is probably the concept that best captures what the majority of writers see as the essence of empowerment, i.e. *‘the ability to formulate strategic choices and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes’* (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005).

Migration can influence women’s empowerment in multiple ways, which can reinforce or contradict each other. Based on the literature, Figure 1 schematically represents the mechanisms of migration influence on different indicators of women’s empowerment. The top box shows the different channels through which migration can impact those left behind, i.e. the migrant’s absence and the flows of money, goods or ideas that may ensue from migration (monetary, in-kind and social remittances, direct investments). It suggests that the effects vary according to who migrates, the duration of migration, frequency of visits, and the type, frequency and amounts of remittances, as shown by Bennett et al. (2013) for the effects on children’s education. The bottom box contains women’s empowerment outcomes, such as increased access and control over resources, decision-making power and mobility. Changes however need to be mediated or ‘enabled’ by other factors allowing women to access a state of increased autonomy, represented in the middle box. Household nuclearisation, changing division of labour or access to paid employment are such prominent enabling factors. These effects are conditioned by social and cultural norms, and by the local socioeconomic situation which provides a more or less favourable opportunity structure for change to occur. The dimensions which are likely to be most influenced by migration are represented in bold.

Most studies that have looked at the impact of migration on women left behind have focused on different aspects of women’s individual empowerment in their relationships within the household, and to a lesser extent in the local community. Many examined the status of the migrants’ wives and shifts in gender relations in the household left behind. Although referring to different terms of women's ‘empowerment’ such as ‘emancipation’, ‘autonomy’ or ‘status’, they often focus on similar indicators pertaining to intra-household dynamics. Since Abadan-Unat’s (1977) seminal article on the impact of migration on the emancipation of Turkish women at origin and abroad, scholars have tended to focus on women’s decision-making (economic or not), access and control over financial resources, changes in the gendered division of labour and the new responsibilities women have to assume following the migrant’s departure. The present study is in line with these research questions, and furthers them by interrogating how changes are mediated by household structures. Its originality lies in the diachronic approach it adopts to look at the lives of migrants’ wives.

Figure 1: Mechanisms of influence of migration and remittances on women's empowerment



Source: the author

* **Empowerment though changing division of labour and greater access to resources and decision-making**

‘Successful’ migration can considerably improve a household’s welfare and benefit the women through improved material living conditions and better access to a range of services and public goods. However, another more immediate effect of emigration is that women might have to take on tasks and responsibilities previously assumed by men, especially in agriculture (Datta and Mishra, 2011). Male absence and *de facto* female headship can empower women by giving them control over resources and opportunities to make household and budgeting decisions. They can become responsible for daily expenditures and even major ones, and allocate money for ongoing expensive projects such as the construction of houses (Brink, 1991). In the absence of their husbands, women might also have to carry out activities outside of their home, such as going to the marketplace and interacting with organisations and institutions they might not have used before such as banks and administrations (Abadan-Unat, 1977; Louhichi, 1997). In rural areas, they might have to decide about agricultural matters such as crop selection (Boehm, 2008; Datta and Mishra, 2011) and hire labourers and supervise their work (McEvoy et al., 2012). These new responsibilities can be empowering if they lead to enhanced self-confidence and the wider recognition of women’s competencies by the community.

* **… dependent on woman’s *household structure* and *stage in the life cycle…***

However, the extent to which women benefit ultimately depends on the outcomes of intra-household bargaining processes, themselves predicated on their *household structure* and *stage in the life cycle* (Louhichi, 1997). Women living with their in-laws tend to be in a subordinate position, and may not have direct access to remitted money nor assume new tasks or responsibilities which can lead to their empowerment. In extended patrilocal households (the ideal-type of the Arab family organisation), migrants generally remit to the household head, i.e. the migrant’s father or another of his relatives, not his wife (Taylor, 1984; Mondain et al., 2012). Residential independence from the in-laws is thus often desired by the wives, even if this can entail heavier workloads. Cultural norms however mean that it only becomes a possibility once she has had children and is more secure in her marriage.

Migration can facilitate this process as remittances are often used to build or buy a house, thus allowing the migrant’s wife and children to move out from the in-laws and form a nuclear family of which she becomes the *de facto* household head. Doing so, she escapes her in-laws’ supervision and gains much greater power over the allocation of resources (Brink, 1991; Hajjarabi, 1995). This explains why investment in real estate is often a priority for the women and one of the main benefits migrants’ wives expect from their spouse emigration (Brink 1991). The relationship between migration and household nuclearisation is however not straightforward: while most studies point to international migration accelerating this process (Brink, 1991; Louhichi, 1997; Khalaf, 2009; de Haas and van Rooij, 2010), other studies suggest otherwise. Steinmann (1993) observed that the general trend towards the dissolution of the extended family structure was stronger among non-migrant households in the Todgha villages she surveyed. The higher proportions of complex households and of women aged 15 to 54 living with parents-in-laws among households with a current international migrant, in both urban and rural areas, visible in the 2006-7 MLSS data shown in Table 1, are consistent with this observation.

* **… or pseudo-emancipation**

Accessing your own nuclear household furthermore does not necessarily mean full access to migrant’s income and women often continue living near their in-laws. Access to finances should moreover not be equated with full economic decision-making power. Previous studies show that women generally get to decide only on daily expenses and small purchases, while men remained responsible for major ones (Menjívar and Agadjanian, 2007) and for the management of important investments such as properties (Khalaf, 2009). While improvements in communication technologies can have positive impacts on transnational family life, it has also enhanced the migrants’ capacities to retain greater management and decision-making power at origin, possibly at the expense of other female relatives. Gains in decision-making power may sometimes be stronger in non-economic matters, such as the children’s education (Khalaf 2009).

New responsibilities and roles may furthermore be resented if they increase the workload and responsibilities of women in migrant households, without offering great compensations. It can be regarded as a ‘double burden’ for women if they still have to assume all their previous tasks, particularly in landowning households (Massey, 2009) and can generate social and psychological stress, especially if these changes are not well perceived by the community (de Haas and van Rooij, 2010). In traditional settings, women might even develop strategies in order to maintain the appearances of unchanged gender roles and make sure that the men do not ‘lose face’, and expect to go back to their previous role on the husband’s return (Brink 1991). Finally, gains in autonomy and authority may only be temporary (while the husband is away).The literature however does not show consensus on this issue as some authors tend to think that changes in the migrants’ absence are lasting (Yabiku et al., 2010), while others don’t (Brink, 1991; de Haas and van Rooij, 2010).

Finally, partner’s emigration may give rise to new vulnerabilities for women. As left-behinds tend to be highly dependent on remittance income, women’s unpaid contribution can be further devalued and wives can be left with nothing when their spouse do not remit or stop sending (abandonment, death of migrant, etc.). This problem can prove particularly serious for elderly women in less developed countries, as they tend to outlive their husbands (because of the usual age difference) and rely heavily on family and community support (Hugo 2000). In the Todghra oasis, Steinmann (1993) notes that the women staying behind worried about money not arriving, husbands marrying another woman and raising children without the husband’s authority figure. In these conditions, men may use their wives’ financial insecurity as a way to discipline them, including through threats of divorce (Hajjarabi, 1988), and women’s status can be easily jeopardised by community gossip (McEvoy et al., 2012).

This overview shows that rather than a truly empowering experience, staying behind may be more akin to ‘pseudo-emancipation’, a term used by Abadan-Unat to describe ‘a freedom which actually does not liberate women but serves rather as an escape mechanism’ (1977: 52). If any, empowerment gains are likely to be highly dependent on wives’ bargaining position in their households and the relationship to their migrating husbands. This hypothesis is investigated here based on the life narratives of thirteen women left behind.

1. **Data**

The impact of migration on wives’ bargaining and decision-making power within the household is explored through the analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in 2012 with thirteen women living in international migrant households in a small town in the Berber region of the Southwestern Sous region, among which ten were or had been married to a migrant to France. Characteristics of the sample are provided in Table 2. These life narratives reflect the respondents’ profiles (i.e. rural background, mainly illiterate, middle-aged to older for most of them) and the particular location where they are set (a small town in a region of relatively long-established low-skilled emigration to France of men who generally have a regularised status at destination). Some of them span almost forty years and may appear as belonging to a distant past where patriarchal social norms were yet to be challenged. Yet, by adopting a diachronic approach, analysis of these testimonies reveal how migration can interact with determinants of women’s intra-household bargaining power, following the important stages of the women’s domestic life cycle and of the migrant’s trajectory.

Table 2: Characteristics of the interviewees

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Name** | **Age** | **Marital status** | **International Migration** |
| **Current Migrant** | **Return Migrant** | **Deceased Migrant** |
| 1 | **Leila** | 59 | Married | X (husband) |  |  |
| 2 | **Khadija** | 47 | Widow |  |  | X (husband) |
| 3 | **Fatima** | 47 | Married | X (daughter) |  |  |
| 4 | **Souad** | 36 | Married |  | X (daughter) |  |
| 5 | **Myriam** | 65 | Widow |  |  | X (1st husband) |
| 6 | **Keltoum** | 57 | Married |  | X (husband) |  |
| 7 | **Zakia** | 42 | Divorced | X (siblings & ex-husband) |  |  |
| 8 | **Amina** | 31 | Single |  | X (uncle) |  |
| 9 | **Mahjouba** | 64 | Married |  | X (husband) |  |
| 10 | **Zohra** | 58 | Married |  | X (husband) |  |
| 11 | **Fatim-Zahra** | 65 | Widow |  |  | X (husband) |
| 12 | **Aicha** | 57 | Widow |  |  | X (husband) |
| 13 | **Asna** | 49 | Married | X (husband) |  |  |

1. **The three “ages” of the migrants’ wives**

The narratives of the women left behind provide an account of their shifting position in the household left behind, following a broadly chronological order highlighting three “ages” of the wives corresponding to stages of the domestic cycle: the marriage and life with the in-laws, the wife’s accession to her nuclear household and changes following the migrant’s return and eventual death.

* 1. **The first age: living with the in-laws**

Most women had an arranged marriage at an early age (between 15 and 19) with an older man generally unknown to them. In general, the man was already a migrant in France and returned during a holiday to get married. Half of these marriages were endogamous, and arranged through relatives, acquaintances or at the initiative of the migrant himself. Some women were asked for their consent but, as common at the time, most had no or very little say in the whole arrangements. The wedding ceremonies usually followed swiftly and, in accordance with the patrilocal residence rule, the new wife went to live with her in-laws in her husbands’ family house. This new residence could be in the same neighbourhood as the women’s parents, or far away, in which case marrying meant a real uprooting for those young women who had generally never travelled anywhere before. Having married a migrant, they become migrant themselves, but not as trailing wives. It was common for the new wife to spend only a few days or weeks with the husband before he returned to France, and she was then left alone with his extended family.

The clear gendered assignation of roles and power in Mediterranean Arabo-Berber communities has been described in anthropological studies (Hajjarabi, 1995; Lacoste-Dujardin, 1996). This order legitimises the domination and control by men over women and of older women over younger ones. As described in Kandiyoti’s (1988) notion of ‘classic patriarchy’, the rules of this order is predicated on the developmental cycle of the patrilocal extended household. A young bride entering her husband’s house must obey not only all the men but also the more senior women in the family, especially her mother-in-law. Her status and power are then at their lowest, and it’s only with time and the production of male offspring that she can expect to assert her position within the domestic sphere, usually at the expense of the in-laws. This ideal-typical model of the intra-household power dynamics provides an adequate framework to depict what most of the interviewees experienced in the aftermath of their wedding. Upon arrival in their new house, their position in the household power matrix meant that they drew few benefits from being married to a migrant. First, in terms of personal attributes, culture and low human capital contributed to their lower position. As submissiveness and obedience are traditionally expected from a young bride, the respondents had been raised to comply with this ideal, and to accept their fate and be patient. Their youth, inexperience and complete illiteracy contributed in making their domination more effective. They also had no assets and little or no control over resources.

The situation tended to be even worse for women who had been previously married, as widows and especially divorced women are traditionally less valued on the marriage market. This was the case of Aicha, who had married at 15 and divorced two years later. At 18, her parents married her without her consent to a recently widowed migrant in France, almost forty years older than her. In her husband’s house, she had to cohabit with the sons and daughter from the first marriage who were the same age as her, and showed her outright hostility from the outset. While the prospect of marrying an international migrant had initially been a consolation, she was soon disillusioned:

When I heard that my husband was an emigrant, I imagined that I was going to have it all, that I would go to France, that I would travel, have a good life. I thought about all that. But unfortunately, what I found was a hole, I fell into an inescapable hole.

[Aicha, 57, widowed]

As highlighted in the review, the cultural inappropriateness of childless women living on their own and the need to care for the husband’s parents can delay the prospect for a married woman to have her own home. For these reasons, the women usually had to live with their in-laws for periods ranging from a couple of years to decades, without their husband possibly acting as a mediator with rest of the family. The scarcity of the visits and lack of means of communication at the time meant that the wives could not really complain nor resort to their husbands in case of conflicts and prevented the migrant from effectively intervening in the intra-household dynamics back home, had he wanted to. Indeed, the migrants’ visits, once or twice a year at best, did not offer many opportunities for the wives to confide, especially in a cultural context where conjugal intimacy and emotional attachment are shunned (Mernissi [1975] 2011). The occasional letters, the tape recordings (from the 1980s) and the phone calls received first in local convenience shops and then on landlines in the houses did not allow any intimate exchanges between husband and wife as these were rarely private and more often intended to the whole family. It is only with the recent coming of mobile phones that women have started having unsupervised conversations with their husbands. As a result, women could not really use their conjugal relationship to better their position within the household if they did not get on well with their in-laws (the mother in law in particular), or if they were treated merely as maids as it seemed to be often the case.

Likewise, women living with their in-laws were generally deprived of the main benefit they expected from being a migrant’s spouse, i.e. the control over remittances and budgeting decisions. Remitting practices are governed by social and cultural norms (King et al., 2006) which may be consistent or not with the migrant’s own preferences, but are likely to prevail. For a husband, it is generally considered shameful (*‘Hchouma’*) and an offence to his patrilineal family to send money directly to his wife if she is living with his parents or brothers. The remittances are usually addressed to the father, or if he is dead or sick, the mother or a brother. The woman then depends on her in-laws good will to redistribute the money and the interviews suggested that it did not go without tensions and conflicts. Leila was living with her husband’s sick father and brother, and it was the latter who received the remittances. She recalls that:

Every time I asked him for money – if I needed to buy something, like some clothes for example – he would always say no and would reply ‘Wait for the idiot [donkey] you married. When he’ll come, he’ll buy you everything you want!’. He received the money from my husband but he would not give me any. Just food, that’s it. And not even good food.

 [Leila, 59, married]

Such stories were common to almost all the interviewees, including those who had children, for as long as they lived with their in-laws. The complete lack of control over resources meant that they could not exert decision-making power in other domains, including their own children’s health or schooling. And whilst most tried to alert their husbands of the situation, usually during his visits, it was usually in vain. Strict cultural norms meant that migrants who were sensitive to their wives pleas and wanted to help them had no choice but to leave some money with them during their occasional visits, unknown to the rest of the family, or to send it through intermediaries. That is what Leila’s husband did, because although he was aware of the situation with his brother, he would not confront him. Such aid however tended to be very limited, e.g. the price for an entry to the public baths.

The births of children usually relax these cultural imperatives as the woman’s status in the household is enhanced and her claims to her husband’s remittances are legitimised by the need to look after her progeny. However, this may not give her access to remittances as long as she lives with her in-laws. Unfair treatment and lack of access to resources explain that women generally yearned for their own nuclear household, a process not necessarily facilitated by migration.

### The second age: residential independency

#### *Role of international migration in the nuclearisation process*

The descriptive statistics from the 2006-7 MLSS provided in Table 1 suggested a positive relationship between migration and the maintenance of complex and three-generation households. Against a backdrop of a process of family nuclearisation in Morocco, the interviewees’ testimonies hinted at how male migration and remittances may favour the maintenance of the more traditional model of the patriarchal extended family. Indeed, migration can accelerate nuclearisation when the migrant’s money is invested in housing and used to build separate houses for the family members, allowing the migrant’s wife to live independently with her children. All the interviewed women eventually obtained their own house, sometimes after many years, but this process was fraught with pitfalls pertaining to the migrant’s absence and the power dynamics in the household.

First, this demand had to come at the right time. Whilst residential independence may only happen when a woman has become a mother, care arrangements can hinder this process as patrilocal residence rules mean it is traditionally the sons’ wives that are in charge of looking after their husbands’ elderly parents. In the absence of other women in the household who can act as caregivers, the wife is entrusted with that responsibility and is unlikely to get to live independently as long as she has to fulfil that function, usually until the death of the migrant’s parents. Besides, a wife’s attempts to live independently are often met with strong resistance from her in-laws, since remittances are unlikely to be addressed to her as long as she lives with her husband’s family. Her presence and that of the migrants’ children in the household furthermore constitute the in-laws’ best guarantee of the continuity and magnitude of transfers as their role as carers for the migrant’s family legitimises the financial support they receive. Incidentally, this also explains that migrants may pursue nuclearisation as a way to escape the heavy financial burden of supporting larger households (de Haas, 2008). In the face of this resistance, many women explained that they only managed to live independently after a violent dispute with the in-laws, on which occasions, they - intentionally or not - put their bargaining power to the ultimate test of the ‘exit option’ and left the house, usually with their own family’s support. In order to avoid such outcomes and continue benefiting from the migrant’s remittances, in-laws sometimes initiate the nuclearisation process. Two wives reported for instance being left behind in the village to work in the fields and take care of the family house and livestock for many years, whilst the in-laws moved to urban settings in houses bought by the migrants.

#### *Changes following nuclearisation*

All women reported that their life changed dramatically when they started living on their own with their children. They felt a newly-found sense of freedom derived from not being constantly supervised and from being able to organise their time as they wished, without the constraints of a schedule imposed by the needs of extended households. The main positive change was for most of them the direct access to their husband’s remittances. Usually, they obtained their nationality cards immediately after getting their own house, allowing them to go and collect the money orders themselves at the Post Office, generally every month. All women expressed their satisfaction at this change which allows them to spend the money as they want, apart from one who said she did not like the responsibility and found it hard to manage the money. The received amounts however tend to be limited (between 1,000 and 2,000 MAD[[1]](#footnote-1) per month), thus necessitating good management and not allowing any extravagant spending.

In line with previous studies, women mentioned the new tasks and responsibilities they have to assume, especially when there are no adult male in the house. Besides finance management, they sometimes have to assume tasks that are not regarded as typically feminine, such as supervising the construction of a house, paying the workers or buying the construction materials. They also reported traveling sometimes on their own, if they need to get an administrative paper for instance, or to collect the rent on property. However, they don’t have to deal with agricultural issues as most families have withdrawn from this activity in the town. These new responsibilities positively change the way they perceive themselves. To a question asking what having to assume many different tasks following her husband’s departure had meant for her, one woman for instance replied ‘*I feel like I have a personality’*, suggesting the empowering role of this experience. Yet, in a context where gender roles remain strictly defined, assuming men’s traditional tasks appeared both as a source of pride *(‘the other women just cannot do anything on their own’*) and discomfort. Many complained about their burdensome workloads and responsibilities, with raising children without their father often mentioned as the most difficult one.

***Limitations, new demands and disadvantage in the transnational household***

These positive changes and new responsibilities unfortunately came with many restrictions. Whilst some women reported that they had been directly in charge of initiating and supervising construction works, management of housing and productive investments seemed to remain the man’s prerogative, sometimes delegated to a father or brother. The strong patrilocal extended family often allows the absent male to manage the family resources and investments by proxy, only leaving small expenditures to the women’s decision making. The husbands of Leila and Asna for instance remained in charge of their real estate investments by undertaking them during their annual holidays, only delegating to their wives or oldest sons what they could not do themselves.

Moreover, while being able to manage the household budget proved a source of profound satisfaction, not being consulted for bigger investments generated frustration, especially when the women felt that the detrimental consequences of migration on their family life had not really been compensated by long-term financial security. Leila for instance could not understand why her husband kept buying land plots and houses, and undertook new constructions that he never completed, matters that he refused to discuss with her.

 He does not listen to what I say. I ask him ‘why have you bought so many houses, why have you bought so many land plots? We have only two children’. But he says that I don’t understand, that he knows what he is doing. He told me it’s in his blood: whenever he sees something [a house or a plot to build] on sale, he needs to buy it.

[Leila, 59, married]

Having acquired certain control over remittances, the women may also have to satisfy new demands, especially from their own families. Since moving in her house, Leila had for instance to constantly host members of her family and used an important share of the relatively modest remittances she received towards meeting the expenses induced by her obligation to show hospitality to her family.

Finally, migrants’ wives are penalised by the clear power imbalance characteristic of the transnational conjugal relations. Besides the remittance flows, other flows and resources appeared as largely controlled by the migrants, contributing to the wives’ disadvantage in the transnational space. First, the interviews suggested the imbalance in terms of information and communication. As mentioned earlier, in the past, women could not easily contact their husbands and even when the phones arrived, the migrant was usually the one calling and the family behind waiting for his calls. Likewise, the interviewees appeared to have very partial knowledge of their husbands’ situation in the country of destination, with many seemingly not knowing exactly where he lived or what job he did, notwithstanding decades of marriage. While such ignorance may be feigned, their access to such information is clearly constrained. While the migrant husband could easily know the whereabouts of his wife if he wanted to, no such possibility is given to her. None of the women had ever visited their husbands in France and were left imagining the life there.

This latter point relates to ‘mobility resources’ (Carling, 2008) and the absence of control of women over them. This proved a major source of tension and dissatisfaction as many wives had wished to migrate themselves or ensure that possibility for their children. This desire was met with strict refusal from the husband, generally without any discussion. Khadija for instance remembers:

My husband used to tell me he would like to take us to France to visit, but he would then also say ‘I am afraid you will run away’ (laugh), he’d say ‘I am afraid you are just like the others [his first wife and daughters in France who refused to return to Morocco with him], so no, you stay here, it’s better. Here, you are a respectable woman, but if I take you to France, you will run away, and start wearing a skirt like that… So, no no no!

 [Khadija, 47, widowed]

Frustration at the husbands’ attitude was often expressed, especially in relation to what the women saw as lost opportunities for their children (sons especially), usually the promise of a good education and job prospects that they associated with emigration to Europe. Many seemed angered that their husbands precluded such opportunities, or that they had sent contradictory messages regarding migration prospects to the children. Asna’s sons for instance long hoped that their father would bring them to France, and as they saw their future there, they never invested in their education. Her husband never clearly denied that possibility until they reached the age of majority and could no longer apply under family reunification. One son developed mental health issues, and none of her seven adult children worked or studied at the time of the interview.

* 1. **The third age: After the migrant’s return or death**

Literature on women left behind usually focuses the analysis on the two “ages” described above. Yet, for women staying at origin, the consequences of their husbands’ migration can be felt long after his their possible returns and/or eventual death, especially when age differences between husband and wife mean for instance that elderly migrants can have much younger wives and school-age children at time of retirement. This last section endeavours to underline some of the issues these women are faced with in this ‘third age’, and implications for their level of empowerment.

#### *Migrant’s return: lasting changes?*

Whilst the question as to whether the empowering changes that wives may experience last after the migrant’s return remains largely open in the literature, the women’s testimonies rather suggest a loss of power upon their husbands’ return. Although many women had acquired management responsibilities and the control of finances, these were delegated to them out of necessity and the husbands mostly took them over on their return. Still, as many returned migrants circulate between Morocco and France in order to get their pensions, some women continue exercising some responsibilities while their husbands are away.

Although women expressed the expected satisfaction at seeing their family reunited, they also sometimes resented the loss of control over household resources and the need to constantly ask for money, as exemplified by Mahjouba who used to be in charge of the budget and investments during her husband’s migration. On his return, he initially let her manage the expenditures relating to the children, but stopped giving her or the children any money after a while.

I saw a big difference when he came back. Before I had the money and I decided how to spend it, and I could buy home decoration, rugs, etc. Now that he is here, he only buys food, that’s it. And if we want to buy some clothes or something for the house, he says no. If you want something, you have to ask him once, twice, again and again, and he gives you maybe 100 Dirhams. 100 Dirhams and he leaves. It’s not like before.

 [Mahjouba, 62, wife of returned migrant]

The communication between husband and wife also seemed limited, which may be unsurprising given the geographical and emotional distance that migration and culture had imposed for decades. Therefore, wives of returned migrants could often only speculate as to the reasons behind their husband’s behaviour. Certain frustration could also be expressed about the limited long-term benefits they felt migration had brought to the family:

All what remains is what I have done *[the houses built for their children]*, but as soon as he came back, his only interest was working in the fields. He works in the fields everyday. He spends all the money on the fields. But he hasn’t done anything else, nothing that could provide us with an income.

 [ibid.]

Besides these financial considerations, return also seemed to bring about a difficult readjustment to conjugal life for both husband and wife, as they were not used to live with each other.

Whilst increasingly discussed in the migration literature, it is worth mentioning that no evidence of social remittances was found in the interviews. There was for instance no indication that migrants had encouraged their children to pursue education or that they came back with more progressive ideas regarding gender relations and women’s role in the family and society. Although the limited sample may not have allowed capturing such influences, any such changes are arguably unlikely because attachment to traditional values and gender order underlies the refusal of certain migrants to apply for family reunification at destination, and their eventual return. The strength of the gendered labour division in rural areas, traditional background and possibly older age may also explain that these men who had sometimes lived alone for decades, taking care of their own cooking, washing and cleaning, came back to take on the role of the patriarch in a traditional family order.

#### *After the migrant’s death*

Finally, although rarely mentioned in studies dedicated to women left behind, the difficulties specific to international migrants’ widows emerged from the field. Due to the age difference between husband and wife, especially in cases of the man’s remarriage, women can become widows at a relatively young age in Morocco, with implications for themselves and their children (two interviewees became widows with children aged under 5). Due to the weakness of the social safety nets and low levels of pensions in Morocco, widowhood can mean an abrupt descent into poverty for women and they may be forced to move back with relatives. In this respect, widows of international migrants found themselves in a better position because of the assets they could inherit and the benefits they could claim. Indeed, they tended to inherit substantial assets which endowed them with some degree of material security, as was the case for Khadija who inherited the unfinished house her late husband had built, and to a lesser extent Aicha, who inherited half of the family house in the remote village. However, it seemed very common for women not to claim their rights and for in-laws to claim ownership of properties that they are not entitled to.

Secondly, widows of international migrants can be entitled to a widowhood allowance or reversionary pension from the administrations in the foreign country where their husband worked[[2]](#footnote-2). During the fieldwork, these allowances were an important subject of conversation and concern, and something for which the researcher’s help was often requested. Due to the women’s lack of knowledge of their late husband’s work and life in France, as well as their illiteracy, claiming these pensions proved extremely difficult and the women sometimes fell prey to intermediaries who offer to contact the foreign administration and do whatever necessary for these women to obtain their pensions, in return for a fixed sum or a percentage. Such practice shows that even after their husband’s death, women left behind often continue being disadvantaged in the transnational scene in their access to social rights.

1. **Conclusion**

The analysis demonstrated that the wife’s stage in her life cycle and the household structure conditioned her access to the benefits of migration. Whilst it is often hypothesised that wives can be empowered as a result of the migration of their husbands, this study rather suggests that this possibility only corresponds to a particular stage in the women’s lives, i.e. when they accede to their own nuclear household and becomes *de facto* household heads. Yet, the analysis has also highlighted the ways migration may slow rather than facilitate this process. While remittances can help establish separate households, nuclearisation may (i) only happen at a particular stage in the house cycle (when the wife has children and does not have to care for her husband’s parents), (ii) face resistance from the in-laws who want to continue receiving the remittances, or (iii) happen at the wife’s expense if initiated by the in-laws. Benefits may furthermore be limited and/or temporary, and the migrant’s return may mark a reversal of the situation.

In accordance with previous studies (Brink 1991, de Haas and Van Rooij 2010), this study therefore suggests that migration systems predicated on patriarchal social and family order are unlikely to be conducive to sustainable women’s empowerment in the origin household and community. Migration and remitting practices are fundamentally shaped by prevailing gender and generational structures in Morocco, and their potential to challenge those structures is therefore very limited. Under certain circumstances, they may even reinforce them, making them more resilient in the face of contemporary social changes. In such systems, women are most likely to access the resources resulting from migration by behaving in accordance with traditions (Louhichi 1997) and drawing on the rights and entitlements granted to them by their religion and culture, such as the right to material support from their husband that Islam endow to them (*nafaqah*). Future research on the empowerment of women left behind should therefore consider how migrations departing from the traditional model, such as independent female migration, may have more important and far-reaching effects at origin.

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1. 1 GBP=approx. 14 MAD. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Based on the 2007 Franco-Moroccan Convention on Social Security, the widow of a migrant is entitled to an allowance for two years (if under 50) or until she reached 55 (if aged 50 or over). After 55, she can apply for a reversionary pension (*Convention du 22 octobre 2007*). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)