

## Forum

# Empowering Women Weavers? The Internet in Rural Morocco

**Susan Schaefer Davis**

sdavis@uslink.net

Independent Scholar and  
Consultant

791 College Avenue #2

Haverford, Pennsylvania 19041

USA

## Introduction

This is a case study of whether and how the information society empowers women at two sites in rural Morocco, where mostly illiterate women sell the rugs they weave on the Internet. It examines both benefits and constraints, which include the women's illiteracy and lack of net skills in addition to the lack of village Internet connections. Among the benefits is a worldwide market with increased sales through which women rather than middlemen obtain more of the profits generated by their work; these profits are used mainly to support the family or for children's education and sometimes for community projects. Thus women gain some degree of empowerment. This article discusses what that empowerment means and its implications.

Although widely used, the concept of empowerment is often not clearly defined. I examine ways in which this Moroccan ICT project empowers local people (i.e., whether it gives them more choices in and control over their lives, including access to resources, more agency, and achievements) (Kab-eer, 1999; The World Bank Group, 2005), in both the *individual* benefit and *collective*, or condition-altering, senses (Young, 1997).

There are widespread stereotypes about the relation of Islam to gender and power. In these, men hold all authority and women must submit to their will; men are fully empowered to control their own lives and the lives of others, and women have no power at all. This, in fact, is not true for Morocco (Davis, 1983), nor is it true for other Muslim countries. Within both Morocco and the Arab world, women's individual and collective levels of empowerment vary. For example, women cannot drive nor go out without being fully covered in Saudi Arabia, whereas Moroccan women can both drive and dress as they wish. In Morocco one often sees a girl in *hijab* or modest dress, with her hair covered, walking hand in hand with her friend who has flowing tresses and is wearing snug blue jeans. There is also regional variation: a middle class young urban woman would usually have more say in choosing her future spouse than would her rural Moroccan cousin. One finds such degrees of variation within all Muslim countries.

One source of stereotypes of Muslim women's powerlessness is the lack of accurate information on their lives, at least until relatively recently. Past observations were often by outsiders, usually males, for whom Muslim women are expected to literally or figuratively disappear (i.e., serving guests silently and with downcast eyes). This was interpreted as demonstrating their utter submission to males. But we now have a plethora of information from women, from their own cultures, or from others who live with them. These accounts provide a much richer and more realistic picture of Muslim women's roles—roles in which they have various kinds of power in various domains.

## THE INTERNET IN RURAL MOROCCO

Although the main focus is on women, the effects of ICTs will be considered for both sexes, because both men and women are involved in this case study. Just as all Muslim women are not powerless, not all Muslim men are powerful. There are large constraints on men's social positions and economic classes, and indeed there are men who could also benefit from individual or collective empowerment. A poor man may be able to control his wife's or his children's comings and goings, but he still does not have much choice or control over his own life if he cannot find a more desirable job to earn a better living for his family.

In what ways might an ICT project lead to empowerment for either sex? The hands-on use of ICT could open opportunities in other domains for users, providing access to information that could help them at the individual or collective level. Individuals might use ICT directly to earn money, improving their personal situations and in turn giving themselves more choices and control over their lives. (Everyone has heard of the women in India who sell time on their cell phones to others to generate income.) Or they might locate a group on the Internet that supports their needs or aspirations for change and join it to work for collective empowerment. This could happen among individuals of either sex.

Is this empowerment through ICT true at the lowest socioeconomic levels of society? Can we expect illiterate rural women or men to benefit from ICTs? It will be difficult for individuals to use the Internet if they cannot read, but can they be involved with it in another way that will lead to empowerment? The following case study of rural Morocco examines these questions.

### Gender and Empowerment In Women Weavers OnLine

Women Weavers OnLine is the nonprofit arm of a larger Web site that primarily sells Moroccan textiles. Readers can visit the site at [www.marrakeshexpress.org](http://www.marrakeshexpress.org) (note the American spelling of Marrakesh), and click on Women Weavers OnLine (<http://d2ssd.com/www-source/weaversoverview.html>) at the bottom of the home page. Figure 1 illustrates the village women displaying their rugs online.

To fully understand the potential of this project to empower Moroccan weavers and those who



*Figure 1.* Ijja Mimouni, a widow living with one of her six children, holds a rug that she made and sold through Women Weavers OnLine. With the money she earns from weaving, she pays household expenses, and she hopes to build a new house.

work with them, it is important to describe the characteristics of the participating villages and the process they follow to sell rugs online.

### The Villages

In both villages, people live by working in small-scale agriculture (mostly irrigated) and raising animals (mainly sheep). The climate is pleasant to hot in summer and harsh in winter, with temperatures below freezing. Like the whole Atlas Mountain region, people are quite poor and often substantially supported by family members working outside the village. Thus both sites are good candidates for development activities.

N'kob is located in the Anti-Atlas Mountains in southern Morocco, south of Marrakesh. Its people are from the Ait Ouaghrda tribe, which is famed for its skilled weavers. In this village of 700 people, nearly all of the women older than 13 know how to weave. (Only women weave rugs in most of Morocco.) They learn from their mothers at home; there are no factories or commercial workshops. There is a primary school with classes up to sixth grade, after which students must go to Taznakht, an hour away by dirt road. There is no regular telephone line, and mobile phones work only at one spot in the village; electricity was not available until late 2005.

Ben Smim is located further north in the Middle



Figure 2. N'kob in southern Morocco is one of the Women Weavers OnLine project sites.



Figure 3. North of N'kob, Ben Smim is the second Women Weavers OnLine project site.

Atlas Mountains, not too far from Fez and Meknes, with about 1,300 residents. It too has only a primary school. It has regular electricity, however, and good mobile phone coverage.

People in both villages speak Berber, the Tashelhit dialect in the South and Tamazight in the North. Most women in the North also speak Arabic, but very few in the South do so.

### **The Process**

I began exploring the feasibility of selling Moroccan textiles on the Internet in 1994, when I set up a Web site for that purpose. Indeed the textiles sold

on the Internet, in this case mainly rugs purchased from urban merchants and brought to the United States, because I lacked the resources to locate and work directly with rural women. After establishing that handmade textiles would sell on the Internet I moved to the next phase in 2001: working with rural women to sell their products directly. This has been described as “getting the weavers online” but that is not strictly true. In Morocco, most rural weavers are illiterate, so they are unable to use the Internet. Selling textiles on the Internet in this project involves the following steps:

#### **1. Information collection**

This step includes photographing, measuring, and weighing (to calculate postage, which is built into the price) the items. The items, which are usually rugs but sometimes also pillows, remain with the women until sold. The women are also interviewed briefly about their life situation, their work, and their spending habits and are then photographed if they agree to appear on the Internet (most do).

At each site an educated local assistant is trained to eventually replace my work in this phase; currently the assistant mainly

helps with the previous steps at one site, but at the other is nearly self-sufficient.

#### **2. Pricing and Web presentation**

Using the information above, material is prepared for the Web. This includes editing photos, writing text describing the textiles and the women, pricing items, and placing them on Web pages. When the one-of-a-kind item sells, the pages must be updated. I do these tasks because the assistants lack English and computer skills.

#### **3. Processing orders**

The assistants and I work together to process orders. I receive orders by e-mail and then use a cell phone

or e-mail to ask the assistants if an ordered piece is available. (The women are free to sell items locally should the need arise; textiles often serve as a form of savings.) Next, I inform the client by e-mail and they pay me by check or electronically. Payment directly to Morocco is slow and expensive, so paying me is the best option, plus it allows clients to interact with an English speaker. I send the payment to Morocco either by fax for bank transfer, by wire transfer, or through friends. I e-mail the shipping address and the financial details to my assistant; when I am in Morocco, I send the address by text message on a cell phone. After the local assistant knows the money is available in town, the assistant gets the rug from the weaver, packs it, and takes it into town to mail. Finally, the assistant goes to the bank to collect the money to pay postage and other expenses and pays the weaver when he or she returns home.

### Gender and Empowerment Through Current Project Activities

There are some constraints on the use of ICTs, and these may or may not be related to gender. For example, although both villages now have electricity, neither has fixed phone lines. Thus it would be impossible to connect a computer to the Internet in either village, even if a villager could afford one, and these people cannot. (Satellite technology is too expensive.) Therefore, the assistants at both sites use mobile phones. None of these constraints are related to gender issues in Morocco.

Empowerment relates to gender on two levels: for the assistants and for the village women involved in the project. I will discuss these concepts in the following sections.

#### *The Assistants*

Several aspects of the assistants' work *could* be influenced by gender. In both villages the assistants use e-mail at a cybercafé in another town. This requires literacy, basic computer skills, and the ability to travel to another town. If one were to generalize about Morocco, one would expect women to have less access than men in all of these areas. The illiteracy rate for women in Morocco is nearly twice that for men—in 2004, 32.5% of men and 60.4% of women were illiterate (The World Bank Group, n.d.); these rates are higher in rural areas. Because women are less literate, one would also expect a lower rate of computer skills. Further, women in

general are less able than men to travel on their own and thus get to cybercafés. Finally, these characteristics vary by area within Morocco—there are fewer gender constraints in the north.

Some of these characteristics apply and others do not for the project assistants. Because the southern site is more isolated, and in general the south lags behind in female education and independence, I could not find a woman at that location with adequate education to be a project assistant; instead, I work with the man who is the head of the village development association. On the other hand, the woman who is the project assistant in the northern village is much better educated than the man who is the project assistant in the south; she has a university degree, and he is at the primary school level. She knew how to use e-mail and the Internet before starting the project; he has learned basic skills recently. She can write messages in French and read them in English; he needs help to write in French. Both assistants have the freedom to travel to a cybercafé, but she would not if she were less educated and lived in the south. In addition, the northern assistant can take digital photos, measure and describe the women and rugs in French, and send me the information on a CD (local Internet connections are too slow); the southern assistant has only begun to use a digital camera. Finally, being a man could be a distinct disadvantage, because interacting with women weavers who are not relatives would be seen with suspicion in some parts of Morocco. However, in the southern village most families see themselves as related, so this is not a problem.

Although gender can influence several aspects of this work, and inability to do the work would limit a person's access to the empowerment derived from such work, these barriers are not aspects of the Women Weavers OnLine project. Further, this case study illustrates that general cultural limitations should not be used to rule out participation in ICT projects by one gender—which is most often females. Indeed, in the past women have been excluded from many Moroccan development projects. Such views are usually imposed by nonlocal males who subscribe to gender stereotypes about the limitations of Muslim women (Davis, 1992). These data illustrate that one must look beyond stereotypes.

What kind of empowerment might a project assistant gain from their work? The female assistant's role is primarily that of an individual helping the

women sell their rugs—but she has no wider village role. The male assistant also sells rugs, but he does so as president of the village development association, a more public role within an organized group. Thus both have gained village respect and perhaps some degree of broader local respect, granting them a type of individual empowerment. In economic terms, the woman earns a percentage on each rug sold, and the man does not; instead 5% of each rug's asking price (added to the woman's requested price) is donated to the village association for village improvements. Though he gets no income, the man's more public role as the association president provides him with a visibility that could be parlayed into other more empowering roles such as participating in and winning local elections. Thus he might have access to increased personal and collective empowerment: as an elected official he could work to empower all of the poor rural villagers. To a limited degree he has begun to do this: as association president he has requested financial assistance from the Embassy of Japan to build a village multipurpose center to use for meetings and a preschool in addition to displaying rugs for sale. It is less likely that a woman in Morocco would have access to such public routes of empowerment. Yet currently, the woman is earning more than the man from her work with the project, so in financial terms she is more empowered than he is.

### **The Weavers**

What kinds of empowerment do the village weavers gain? They are the largest number of participants, so it is probably to them we should look for evidence of more widespread empowerment. Because most are illiterate, they cannot use Internet ICT themselves, but at both sites many women have earned income by selling their textiles on the Internet. Since late 2001, 73 hand woven items have been sold from Ben Smim and about 160 from N'kob. N'kob women have earned about US\$36,000 (before paying for their expenses). Has this helped to empower these rural women? Two students at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane studied this question in Ben Smim, the northern site. Using control and choice as indicators of empowerment, one of their conclusions was the following:

. . . the Ben Smim Women Weavers Online project participants maintain a level of control over: their handicraft items, the amount of money received,

and modes of spending to cater to their self-perceived needs. This project is empowering because: it does not reduce the level of control of their own work/products, as they can sell items elsewhere whenever they want; the women set the prices of items themselves; and they are exposed to a new, larger global market, which means they are more likely to generate income for their own benefit. This constitutes women's increasing self-reliance, and their right to make choices and influence change through control over economic resources. (El Mahdi & Proberts, 2003, p. 22)

One of the women (whose weaving income helps support her family) commented that earning money gave her some power in making family decisions. The Al Akhawayn University students' assessment of her comments are as follows:

She compared her situation with that of non-weaver women, who passively accept decisions made by their husbands. Therefore, development projects of this kind allow women to use their traditional weaving skills as a means of empowerment. (El Mahdi & Proberts, 2003, p. 21)

These conclusions indicate that northern women participating in the project have attained a degree of individual empowerment.

Similar formal research has not been done in the southern village of N'kob. However, informal interviews with the women indicate that some of them are getting more money from their husbands (who receive the payment when rugs sell) than they did in the past. (I could have insisted that the assistant pay the women directly, but they would just hand the money to their husbands, as is traditional, so this would be an empty and probably irritating gesture.) The main rug income is for family use, largely for food and clothing, medical expenses, or children's school supplies. The women who get a share use it for clothing, jewelry, or household appliances; one of the best weavers bought a blender recently, anticipating the arrival of regular electricity in her village. She also used some of her money to visit her married daughter in a distant town. These examples also illustrate that these women have achieved a limited degree of individual empowerment, at least over their own lives, to choose to purchase items they would not obtain otherwise. For the woman who traveled, her husband had not forbidden her to do so, but was unwilling to pay her bus fare. With

her own income, she was able to control that aspect of her life, taking a trip she really enjoyed.

There is also a hint of collective empowerment in the southern village. At that site I hold meetings with the weavers to ask how things are going and if they have problems or suggestions. Although this meeting is an opportunity to pursue their desires as a group, the women do so to a very limited extent. At one meeting, after I asked them, they listed improvements they would like in the village: a public bath, bread oven, telephone. But they only listed their requests; they had no idea of how to attain them. However, it appears there has been some collective empowerment. Since the project began, one goal has been for the women to get at least some of the profits from their work directly, as opposed to them all being spent on the family and by the husband. (Women do not go to town and market in this area; it would require a day's absence from home and thus neglecting preparing meals and childcare.) Yet I knew I could, and should, not suggest this directly to the men. So in good participatory fashion, I asked the women how they might get the men to give them more of the profits. One wise older woman said, "We could tell them that if they gave us a little something for each sale, we would be motivated to work faster to finish the next rug." At a subsequent meeting I asked if any of the women had tried this, and several hands went up. Although it did not grow out of direct access to ICTs, these women's successful participation in selling online is what led them to this experience of collective empowerment.

Finally, it is possible that N'kob women will be recognized for their contributions to village development through their weaving. I noted previously that 5% of the asking price of each rug goes to the village association. To date they have contributed roughly \$1,400, and that money was used partly to build school latrines and paint a classroom. People said at least some villagers know that money was from the weavers, but that does not yet seem to have grown into widespread awareness or appreciation of the women's contribution to improving the village. In the future such awareness could increase the weavers' prestige and give them more choices or control in certain situations. Perhaps they could form a group to determine how their contributions are used, which would create collective empower-

ment. In fact, the village association is planning to add a women's committee, but this has not yet happened.

### Gender and Empowerment Through Future Project Activities

From the description above, it is clear that selling on the Internet can be fairly complex. For the project to be sustainable, someone in Morocco should be able to handle all of the steps in the process. At this point the project assistants can do some and are learning more, but I still do a great deal. A project assistant must live in a village to have the trust of villagers and to have daily contact about rug availability, yet it is very unlikely a villager would have the fluent English necessary to write Web content. Web skills could be learned but would take training. The most viable solution would be to locate a Moroccan living outside the village who has the requisite skills to replace me in handling these aspects of the project. However, this individual would need to be trustworthy in general, trusted by the villagers, and would definitely need to be paid, most likely by a commission on sales. (I do this work pro bono because I wanted to launch the project by offering affordable prices to encourage people to buy the products.) Working with a trusted nongovernmental organization (NGO) might be preferable because of their focus on collective work and also because they would offer replacement staff. The villagers in N'kob and I have been exploring the idea of having someone in Morocco take over most of the Web site work to make the project sustainable. At this point, if I were unable to continue, the project would grind to a halt, and that is not acceptable.

### Conclusions

The information from these case studies of rural Moroccan weavers selling textiles on the Internet indicates that such a use of ICTs can and does lead to some degree of empowerment, in this case mainly for women. The participants are mostly rural women, and they are individually empowered by their earnings, which give them more control over choices about their own lives. This is the case especially in the northern village, where women customarily control all of their weaving income, and they are now earning more money. There is collective

empowerment in the southern village, where women met as a group and shared an idea about how to encourage husbands to give more of the rug profits to them, which is a step toward improving their situation.

Project assistants, a woman in one village and a man in the other, are also individually empowered by helping villagers earn more money. Additionally the man, who plays a more public role, may be given access to both more collective and individual empowerment through his role in the project; the woman's private role does not afford this level of empowerment. Finally, the person or group who will eventually replace me as manager with Web and English-language skills will already be quite individually empowered by having such rare talents in Morocco, but working on such a project might add to this empowerment.

Are there wider possibilities of empowerment for women using ICTs in Morocco? By expanding the project into other areas, many people could be empowered at the individual level, weavers by earning more money and assistants by earning income, the respect of their neighbors, or both. Collective empowerment could be encouraged by working with the weavers in groups and encouraging them to voice their needs, then helping them to achieve them. The assistants could perhaps do this, but a manager associated with a local NGO and working with the local assistants would be better placed to do so. For example, weavers might desire literacy classes which would lead them to feel, or to be, more empowered, and the NGO could help them participate in such classes. Another possibility for empowerment is access to a current Web site in Morocco called *Tanmia*, or "Development." The goal of the site is for NGOs to share questions, advice, and best practices (more than 2,800 Moroccan NGOs are currently listed), and thus better pursue their collective goals. Using *Tanmia* resources could raise the use of ICT in this project to another level.

These types of empowerment need not be limited to rural Moroccan weavers, but could be expanded through such ICT projects for artisans worldwide. ■

## References

- Davis, S. S. (1983). *Patience and power: Women's lives in a Moroccan village*. Rochester, VT: Schenkman Publishing, Inc.
- El Mahdi, A. & Proberts, D. (2003). *A case study of Marrakesh Express: Women weavers online*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30 (3). Retrieved March 14, 2006, from [http://www.siyanda.org/static/bridge\\_rpc\\_empowerbiblio.htm](http://www.siyanda.org/static/bridge_rpc_empowerbiblio.htm)
- Marrakeshexpress. (n.d.). Retrieved October 16, 2007, from [www.marrakeshexpress.org](http://www.marrakeshexpress.org)
- Schaefer, Davis S. (1992). Impediments to empowerment: Moroccan women and the agencies. *The Journal of Developing Societies*, VIII, 1–2.
- Tanmia. (n.d.). Retrieved October 16, 2007, from <http://www.tanmia.ma/>
- Women Weavers OnLine. (n.d.). Retrieved on October 16, 2007, from <http://d2ssd.com/www-source/weaversoverview.html>
- The World Bank Group. (n.d.). *GenderStats: Database of gender statistics, Morocco*. Retrieved September 10, 2006, from <http://devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats/genderRpt.asp?rpt=profile&cty=MAR,Morocco&hm=home>
- The World Bank Group. (2005). *Measuring empowerment in practice: Structuring analysis and framing indicators* (Policy Research Working Paper No. 3510). Washington, DC: Alsop, R. & Heinsohn, N. Retrieved September 6, 2006, from [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/41307\\_wps3510.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/41307_wps3510.pdf)
- Young, K. (1997). Planning from a gender perspective. In N. Visvanathan, L. Duggan, L. Nisonoff, & N. Wiegiersma (Eds.), *The Women, Gender & Development Reader*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd.