



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

CASE OF AIT CHERKI: A MOROCCAN RURAL COMMUNITY

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Preparing this gender study on the treatment and the perception of children from 0 to 6 years of age was a great challenge. If I consider the different obstacles I faced during these last three months it is amazing that it was born. Some of the obstacles included the fact that using the PLA method, Participatory Learning and Action, requires working openly and freely with the community. Our task would have been easier if the method had been limited to filling out questionnaires or doing interviews. Second, doing a field study in the rural or urban area requires permission from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Six months into the nine-month study I had not yet received permission to go to the field. While waiting for permission I met with some acquaintances living in the outskirts of Rabat who helped me to carry out this study in an urban setting. It was very difficult to work without permission, especially when representatives of the local authorities were present everywhere.

I finally received permission in October. At that point I made the first contact with the Khémisset's local authorities. I had the first meetings with the community, Ait Cherki, trained the team and started working. By the time I obtained permission, the rainy season had started. After a rainy week, the roads were blocked; access to the Ait Cherki was impossible. But, stubborn as I am, I went on a rainy day to the field, and in spite of the advice of the Sheikh (a local representative), I drove ahead to the village. The car came to a stop on the muddy road. We waited hours for the repair services. After this incident, the car was damaged, the team was terrified, and I had frightened myself by my recklessness.

We did not give up. I returned to the field with the team, even though the strong rains continued. This time, however, I left my car near the commune office and went by foot, with umbrellas, to the community. It took an hour—more or less—depending on the condition of the road and the force of the rain. We worked under these conditions for more than five weeks.

This was not the first time I went to the field or studied gender socialization. I have led many research studies on these issues, alone or with students. What was new for me was the use of the PLA method. In this domain, I was a good and studious student. I tried to learn as much as I could about this method. I read many articles and studies describing the method. I also used the research protocol that was presented by Eileen Kane, and discussed during the April 1996 meeting in Washington.

The objectives I had derived from the PLA method as it was presented were:

1. To enhance the eventual implementation of PLA within the Moroccan community.
2. To gain insights into its positive and negative aspects.
3. To test if PLA is the best method to:
 - make the community more expressive,
 - allow the community to participate,
 - allow the community to point out its main needs, and
 - identify the principal actions which would improve the life of the community.
4. To enhance the level of the local researchers implementation of this method.

Introduction

During these last years, great interest has been accorded to rural areas in Morocco. Many studies have been led, and many projects have been implemented, either by the Moroccan Government or International Agencies. Most of these studies focus on household life and women's needs. The studies describe gender inequality at all levels, and show women as subject to multiple forms of deprivation, from the cradle to the grave, in spite of their key role in household livelihood systems, and their productive and reproductive capacity. Education, and especially girls' formal education, is presented as the most important current problem the rural population is facing. Early childhood seems excluded from research; the situation of young children is presented only in terms of health issues.

The last broad family national survey was conducted in 1995¹. It is considered a main source of information and sums up different research on the family, giving the following findings about rural families:

- 47% of rural households are formed by a nuclear family including parents and children.
- Rural households function as a socio-economic unit.
- Within the household, there is a clear division of labor based on gender. The man, as the breadwinner, is primarily involved in productive work on the farm, while the woman as

¹ Enquête Nationale sur la Famille 1995. Rapport de synthèse. Direction de la statistique. Maroc 1996.

housewife and “homemaker”, takes overall responsibility for the reproductive and domestic work involved in the organization of the household.

- 78% of rural households receive the help of their children who are less than 15 years old.
- Three out of four rural households demand that the girls become useful and helpful to the family before reaching 15 years of age.
- About 59% of rural households expect their children to assist them when they become old. Children are perceived as sources of security for parents’ old age.

None of these important data addresses the place and the status of children 0 to 6 years of age, either in the family or within the community. How are children treated by different members of the family? What kinds of perceptions surround them? How does the family prepare them to grow in a healthy way and to be integrated into the community and society? How does an early childhood experience help them to flourish, to be alive and well?

Our research on the treatment and perceptions of children from 0 to 6 years of age was designed to answer these different questions by starting from the daily life of a rural community located in the province of Khémisset, using the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) methodology. The community we studied is Ait Cherki, a village that belongs to the Ait El Ghandour Jamaà. It is located in the Khémisset province, which is situated 75 miles east of Rabat.

The Community of Ait Cherki: A Forgotten Rural Area

Ait Cherki. There is a lack of basic infrastructure in Ait Cherki. There is just one mosque, which also serves the function of a preschool. It is a one-room building in the middle of the village. Nearly all the houses are built with stones and have a well. Because of this, women do not need to seek potable water. Electricity is not yet available in this village or neighboring villages. All the basic buildings, the public bathroom, the health center, the primary school, the mosque, and the flourmill are located near the Jemma building, that is 1.5 or 2 miles from the village. The map drawn by the inhabitants showed the poverty of infrastructure and the daily problems faced by the community.

Our exploration of the community in its daily life, and its division into groups according to socio-economic status, formed the basis for a better understanding of the community’s ways of gender socialization and perception. The value of the child is recognized. Life without children is an empty life. The child gives you a new status in the society; it is the reason of life; it orients your life and empowers you. The following section about children’s life in the community highlights the children’s place within the community.

Children under Six Years of Age: What Kind of Life Do They Have?

■ THE STAGES OF LIFE THAT CHILDREN PASS THROUGH

The most important feature we can note about this classification of children’s stages of life is the appearance of a sort of “period of latency,” from three to six years, where the parents do not

identify the child's evolution in clear stages. They only consider a child who is five years old to be more mature than another who is four, without giving any further distinctions. It seems that the greatest interest is accorded to the first two years of life. The child and the mother are closely attached during this time. Thus, the mother follows the child's evolution, making comparisons between these children and older siblings or other children. The father does not intervene in childrearing until the child reaches 3 or 4 years old.

We noticed that there are clear perceptual differences between how girls and boys develop. They are seen to have very different characteristics. These appear to be the result of parents' projections of their own images about women and men onto young children. Parents emphasize biological differences when they define the variation in gender needs.

■ A LISTING OF CHILDREN-S NEEDS AND WHO PROVIDES FOR THOSE NEEDS

Food needs. To be in good health, children need to be well fed. They are like animals, "when you take care of their food, they grow quickly and without any problem." Now it is believed that children, especially before weaning, need another kind of food. Young mothers provide it to their children. Nutrition is based not only on breastfeeding, but also on vegetables, meat, yoghurt, etc. New mothers are also carrying babies in their arms, and not on their back. However, the number of these mothers is still small in this community, and some of these mothers are mocked by the older ones.

People in the community do not have a good understanding of nutrition. Children until 2 years of age are deprived of vegetables, meat, fish, etc. Adults are deprived of these foods as well. They eat meat once a week, and even milk and eggs (which are locally produced) are sold in the market.

After weaning, all children eat the same meals as adults, except for some families who add eggs and milk to children's food. In this community, some foods are forbidden to children, both boys and girls, before puberty, for example, the spleen, which they believe produces black marks on the face.

Health needs. Parents understand children's health needs in relation to immunization and diseases. All the children of the community have received immunizations against tuberculosis, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough and measles. In order to register the child's birth, parents are obliged to give the child its first immunization. The other immunizations are done during the annual immunization campaign or by the intervention of the health center staff whose members go to the community from time to time, seeking the children who have not had their immunizations.

Educational needs. Parents manifest a great interest in formal education. They are worried about the lack of educational opportunities. They realize that their children are the first victims of poverty. The village's Koranic school does not operate well. The teacher, the *fquih*, who is a Koranic teacher, cannot give them a good education. Children in this mosque are learning the Koran, and sometimes some letters and arithmetic. The teacher communicates with children in the Berber language and teaches them some elements of the Arabic language. The presence of the *fquih* at school is sporadic, and small children are not assiduous. Parents send them to learn but always want them to be free for some hours a day.

The lack of kindergartens, the failure of the Koranic school, the lack of educational games and toys, the priority accorded to the Berber language by the family and the community, the inappropriateness of the curricula, and the burden of the educational program mandated in Rabat—homogenized for all the schools of the country—are the main handicaps for rural children's success at primary and secondary school.

Limited access to the Health Center by rural women ***The Health Center is situated 1.5 miles from the Ait Cherki village. It includes a special child service with 6 priorities: immunization, monitoring child weight, pregnancy control, family planning, child nutrition, and sanitary education. It organizes an educational session each Friday afternoon, addressed to the young children's mothers. These sessions deal with child nutrition, health, and the first treatment of some diseases. However, rural women's participation is very weak. It is difficult for them to walk for a long distance to participate in these sessions. The mobile health team does not reach this community more than once a year.***

The analysis of the different children's needs shows the marginalization of rural areas. An analysis of life in rural communities demonstrates the deep problem of development which people in rural areas, rich or poor, are facing. The children's rights to food, health, education, and well-being are neither recognized nor respected by the Government, and the parents are not ready to take new initiatives in favor of early childhood or children in general. The primary obstacles that exist are the administrative burden of government and the rural culture.

■ DESCRIPTION OF THE DAILY LIFE OF THE FOUR-YEAR-OLD GIRL

People were asked to describe the typical day for girls and boys at four and six years of age. Usually, children under four years old accompany their mother everywhere. The child is carried on the mother's back, walks beside her, or sits near her. Between four and six years of age the older sister or brother take care of them. This care is required since children under six years of age are considered to be ignorant. Even though there is a general belief in the culture that young children are ignorant, nonetheless, adults are able to identify significant differences between what

children at age four and age six are engaged in, and they see clear gender differences. These are described below.

If we summarize a four-year-old girl's activities during one day, as they were described by the mothers and focused on by the young sisters, we point out the limited and repetitive nature of the child's activities. The four-year-old boy has a different daily experience than his female counterpart. This simple description illustrates deep gender differences: while girls are expected to wake up early, sometimes without any help, mothers take into consideration the character of boys in terms of when they are expected to wake up. Some of them wake up early, others have difficulty in doing so and that is fine. When washing, boys need to be assisted by mothers or sisters; girls manage by themselves. Concerning play activity, girls are allowed to play near home, for a short time, and the mother keeps a watchful eye on them. An implicit permission is given to boys to play as long as they want and where they want. The access to Koranic school is also different. Girls usually attend it one year later than boys, except for those who have siblings attending the same school. In essence, the life of the four-year-old boy is more interesting, and he appears to interact more with adults and siblings than the girl child. Four-year-old girls are expected to be more self-reliant, but they are not yet given many responsibilities. This shifts by age six.

Children and Gender Perceptions

Different perceptions of children emerged in the discussions led with four groups: the parents; the primary first class teachers; the doctor and the nurses of the health center; and the Government officials and local representatives of the commune and the village.

Parents' Perceptions

"The child is a gift. The male child is an investment for the future. The female child is just a visitor."

Children are the basis of the family. It is impossible to form a family without children. They are valued for the security they represent for parents, especially for mothers. Asked about their preference for female or male children, most of those in the group answered that they do not have any preference: A child is a gift from God. However, birth rituals, common beliefs, and the division of tasks between children demonstrate that the culture and the community way of life give some preference to the male child.

Although fathers and mothers declare the absence of gender preference, arguing that "all the fingers of the hand are the same," and that the "parent's heart cannot make a hierarchy between its different parts," we highlighted some practices which suggested gender differences. For example, people make a strident vocal sound to announce the birth of a male child. The same does not happen when a female is born.

The male child represents a real investment for the family. He will have the responsibility of the fields and the family, and he will eventually take the father's place. From an early age, boys adopt

the father's and the men's behaviors. They do not provide any domestic help or take care of their personal affairs. They also refuse to stay at home.

The female child is appreciated by parents when she is around because she is a main source of help for the mother. Girls are perceived as the main material and moral support to their mothers. The mothers are very proud of educating their girls to follow in their footsteps, in their tasks and behaviors. However, the girl has to leave home when she marries. In the matrimonial exchange families lose their girls.

Teachers' Perceptions

"The rural child is timid and fearful. Gender differences do not exist in the classroom."

During the fieldwork, we never met the Koranic schoolteacher. His school attendance in winter depends on the weather. Primary first class teachers were available and very eloquent about the lives of rural children, especially their school performance during their first years at school.

According to teachers, the rural children do not receive any preparation for school within the family. They are free, they do what they want. Parents are very busy and do not pay attention to them. They feed them, no more. Rich people can give a better education to their children, not because they are more aware than the others, but because they have TV, and children learn from its programmes a lot of things, especially the Arabic language.

Rural children are described as timid and fearful. According to the teachers, these children do not communicate with parents and are disoriented when they come to school. There they have to answer the teacher's questions and communicate with other adults who are not their relatives, and they have little experience doing this.

The language issue remains central. Children in their families speak Berber. The first steps of learning Arabic is done at the preschool, but the constant absence of the teacher, his lack of qualifications in teaching small children, and the focus only on the Koran show the failure of this institution to help children to learn and to integrate the Arabic language as a communication tool.

School as milieu of conflict between the Arab and Berber languageC Teachers for the first class in the primary school face a dilemma. The children speak Berber and the curriculum is in classical Arabic. During the first days, some children cannot communicate with the teacher. All during the year many of the children have difficulties in understanding or writing in Arabic. Later they are expected to study in French. Children want to learn, they make a great effort to understand, but the curriculum is heavy, not adapted to rural areas, and the problem of language remains an obstacle to success.

The lack of play and games leaves the child “blank like a white sheet,” which the teacher has to fill without the parents’ help. The role of the teacher is not only to teach language and arithmetic, but also to educate the children. He pays attention to their hygiene, their clothes, and even their health.

The teachers do not notice any gender differences in the classroom. “You find a clever boy as often as you meet a clever girl.”

Success at school does not appear to be related to gender. It depends more on the interest of the family, the success of the elder siblings, and the cultural environment of the child.

Nurses’ and Doctors’ Perceptions

“Children are without childhood.” “Boys are precious.”

This group, which is meeting the health needs of the child, is in touch with the mothers and has a good understanding of the child’s life. They felt that parents lack interest in their children’s growth and development.

Once the child is three, the child becomes the third priority. Rural mothers are very busy. They have no time to spend with a child who starts to manage himself. They have to take care of the livestock and the domestic work. The care of the child comes last.

Those in the discussion group reach this conclusion based on the fact that the children they receive in the Health Center for immunization or consultation are often dirty. This lack of hygiene does not relate only to the lack of the family’s means or the absence of community equipment, it relates also to the mother’s education and awareness of children’s needs.

Rural children are very afraid of foreigners (anyone from outside the community). When they come to the Health Center, they are very attached to their mothers. Boys or girls, 5 or 6 years old, cannot answer the nurses’ questions, or describe their pain, etc. Mothers answer for them. But sometimes the mothers are unable to understand what the nurses are asking them. Most of them do not know the precise age of their children.

The Perceptions of the Government Officials and the Local Commune and Village Representatives

“Rural people are not interested in improving their life. They are waiting for State intervention.”

The main preoccupations of the government officials are related to the village’s infrastructure, the commune’s resources, and the community’s participation in carrying out economic and social

development activities. As they explain, the Sidi El Ghandour commune is poor. The lack of material resources, like markets, factories, housing estates, etc., deprives the commune of a regular income and makes them very dependent on the administrative hierarchy. As a result, the community cannot invest in the development of the local infrastructure. Nor do people in the community have their own resources to provide an income. Many projects are planned, such as a clothing factory, a women's center, (foyer féminin), and the creation of a market (souk), but they have not been carried out.

The government employees are complaining that the rural community members refuse to make any investments to improve the community's well-being. They refuse to make any expenditures to improve their lives and those of their children. Spending money to educate children seems a luxury rather than a basic need.

In terms of young children, the State is meeting some principal needs, like immunization, family planning, and primary education. It is also trying to convince the population to participate as partners to introduce potable water and electricity in their houses.

"The community does not want to invest in kindergarten."

Some officials assert that rural people do not want to spend money on educating their children. They relegate all these activities to the State, like having electricity or potable water, or building a kindergarten and paying its staff.

From these different perceptions, we notice the contradiction between parents' perceptions and those of teachers, nurses, and the government employees. Parents consider children to be an investment, they are struggling for them, and working hard to assure their well-being. They are spending a significant part of the family budget not only to feed the children but to ensure their education and to provide them with decent clothes. Mothers are suffering under the hard work they are doing every day to maintain their children. "Our hands are deteriorated under daily washing," said one mother.

Teachers and nurses perceive the rural parents as weak, unsteady, feeding their children but not providing them any education. They are complaining about the rural children's lives and the harsh conditions. They see rural people as living without any new perspective or hope for the future.

The government employees complain about the resistance of rural people to participate in development projects and their expectations about continued government involvement in the provision of infrastructure.

These different opinions, which are transformed sometimes into stereotypes, express the lack of communication between the different partners. These judgments about rural life are often made by urban people who are living far away from rural people, who are only in contact with them occasionally. They perceive rural reality through their own models, which are urban, middle class, and modern.

Summary

One finding was that childrearing, gender socialization, and the value of the child are more determined by the rural culture, including the parents' education, than the socio-economic status of the family. The results are determined by different ecological, economical, cultural, and social factors within the Ait Cherki community. The results of this study cannot be generalized. Nonetheless, we find the same way of life and the same perceptions within other rural communities studied in other research.

In this study, the institutional relations between sexes and age groups are characterized by the domination of men over women, and old over young. These patterns bear the mark of patriarchy, which was indicated by the high rate of fertility, the son preference, and the stereotypes which devalue women. The conventional models and preconceived notions remain the principal obstacle toward the modernization of the rural areas. Due to these burdens, it seems that all the sensitization campaigns promoting the education of the population on different issues, such as nutrition, health, childrearing, etc., have failed. In order to change this situation, it would require a steady political will, community participation, and democratic institutions.

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Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington D.C. : World Bank, 1999.