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She Inherits, She Sells: community-based theatre to strengthen women's land rights and entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

Women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have the lowest rates of land ownership and workforce participation despite increased educational attainment. Sociocultural norms are often cited as the cause. Using the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology, we conducted action research to address harmful norms around women's inheritance, mobility, sexual harassment, and control over income. Participants were asked to resolve these issues during performances. The plays were performed between February and April 2024, and phone evaluations were collected between February and June 2024. Our play, *She Inherits, She Sells*, with the motto 'anyone can act', was showcased in two Moroccan regions: Fes-Meknes (four villages) and Souss-Massa (five villages). We analysed transcripts of the nine plays and discussions along with hour-long phone interviews (with 189 women and 53 men) to assess whether the plays led to new learnings, changes in thinking, and if participants felt their voices were heard. Findings reveal young women had the most positive experiences: they expressed their opinions more freely, felt entitled to their inheritance, demanded control over their income, and felt confident about reporting sexual harassment. Young men were proactive in addressing violence against women but less so regarding land rights. Conversely, older women felt that asking for inheritance from their brothers and moving without male protection were taboo, and they were less comfortable expressing their opinions during the plays. We recommend increasing the use of such arts-based awareness-raising interventions, especially with youth, as a promising route for social change.

Les femmes de la région MENA (Moyen-Orient et Afrique du Nord) affichent les taux les plus faibles de propriété foncière et de participation à la vie active, malgré un niveau d'éducation accru. Les normes socioculturelles sont souvent citées comme en étant la cause. En utilisant la méthodologie du théâtre de l'opprimé, nous avons mené un travail de recherche-action pour aborder les normes néfastes concernant l'héritage, la mobilité, le harcèlement sexuel et le contrôle des revenus des femmes. Les participants ont été invités à résoudre ces problèmes pendant les représentations. Les pièces ont été présentées entre février et avril 2024, et des évaluations téléphoniques ont été recueillies entre février et juin 2024. Notre pièce « *She Inherits, She Sells* » (Elle hérite, elle vend), dont la devise est « tout le monde

KEYWORDS

Entrepreneurship; Forum Theatre; land rights; gender-based violence; Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region; Morocco's family code reform; public policy; gender norms; gender transformative approaches

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peut jouer », a été présentée dans deux régions du Maroc : Fès-Meknès (quatre villages) et Souss-Massa (cinq villages). Nous avons analysé les transcriptions des neuf pièces et des discussions, ainsi que des entretiens téléphoniques d'une heure (avec 189 femmes et 53 hommes), afin de déterminer si ces représentations avaient donné lieu à de nouveaux apprentissages ou à des changements dans la façon de penser, et si les participants avaient eu le sentiment d'être entendus. Les résultats indiquent que ce sont les jeunes femmes qui ont eu les expériences les plus positives : elles ont pu exprimer leurs opinions plus librement, se sont senties autorisées à recevoir leur héritage, ont exigé le contrôle de leurs revenus et se sont senties sûres d'elles au moment de dénoncer les harcèlements sexuels. Les jeunes hommes se sont montrés proactifs dans la lutte contre la violence à l'égard des femmes, mais moins en ce qui concerne les droits fonciers. À l'inverse, les femmes plus âgées estimaient que demander leur héritage à leurs frères et se déplacer sans la protection d'un homme étaient tabous, et elles se sentaient moins à l'aise au moment d'exprimer leurs opinions pendant les pièces de théâtre. Nous recommandons une utilisation accrue de ces interventions de sensibilisation basées sur les arts, en particulier auprès des jeunes, car il s'agit d'une piste prometteuse en vue de changements sociaux.

En la región de Oriente Medio y Norte de África (MENA), las mujeres, a pesar de su mayor nivel educativo, exhiben las tasas más bajas de propiedad de la tierra y de participación en el mercado laboral. En este sentido, las normas socioculturales prevalentes son comúnmente citadas como la causa principal de esta disparidad. Con el propósito de abordar las normas perjudiciales que afectan temas como la herencia, la movilidad, el acoso sexual y el control de los ingresos de las mujeres, se implementó un enfoque metodológico basado en la metodología del teatro del oprimido. Durante las representaciones, se solicitó a los participantes que propusieran soluciones a los problemas planteados. Las obras se presentaron entre los meses de febrero y abril de 2024, y las evaluaciones telefónicas se llevaron a cabo entre febrero y junio del mismo año. Nuestra obra, "Ella hereda, ella vende", cuyo lema es "cualquiera puede actuar", se exhibió en dos regiones marroquíes: Fez-Meknes (cuatro pueblos) y Souss-Massa (cinco pueblos). Posteriormente, se realizó el análisis de las transcripciones de las nueve representaciones y de las conversaciones ulteriores, al que se sumaron entrevistas telefónicas de una hora (con 189 mujeres y 53 hombres), cuyo objetivo fue evaluar si las representaciones generaron nuevos aprendizajes, cambios de mentalidad y si los participantes percibían que se les escuchaba. Los resultados obtenidos revelan que las mujeres jóvenes experimentaron las vivencias más positivas, pudiendo manifestar sus opiniones con mayor libertad, reclamar el derecho a su herencia, exigir el control de sus ingresos y sintiéndose seguras al denunciar el acoso sexual. Por su parte, los hombres jóvenes demostraron proactividad al abordar la violencia contra las mujeres, aunque no dieron cuenta de un compromiso equivalente en lo concerniente a los derechos sobre la tierra. Por otro lado, las mujeres mayores percibían ciertos tabúes a la hora de exigir una herencia a sus hermanos y de desplazarse sin protección masculina, así como más incomodidad al expresar sus opiniones durante las representaciones. En conclusión, se recomienda el uso de intervenciones de sensibilización basadas en las artes, sobre todo entre los jóvenes, como una vía prometedora para fomentar el cambio social.

Background

The Moroccan family code of 2004, *Moudawana*, was a significant legal reform aimed at enhancing women's rights within the framework of personal status law. It emerged in response to mounting pressure from women's rights organisations, legal scholars, and international human rights advocates, alongside King Mohammed VI's broader modernisation efforts (MIPA Institute 2023). The code introduced several progressive changes, including raising the minimum marriage age for women to 18, granting women the right to initiate divorce, and requiring mutual consent for marriage. However, despite these advancements, the law continues to perpetuate gender inequities in various ways. Polygamy remains legal, albeit with judicial restrictions that are often circumvented, and men retain greater authority in divorce proceedings, as repudiation (*talaq*) is still easier for men than for women. Additionally, inheritance laws remain unequal, with women typically receiving half the share allocated to male relatives (MIPA Institute 2023). While the 2004 reform marked a step forward, its implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in rural areas where customary practices often take precedence over legal provisions, reinforcing persistent gender biases.

Inspired by King Mohammed VI's directive for the government to revise the 2004 family code (MAPNews 2023), the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), Oxfam Morocco, and Spect'Act Foundation embarked on the preparation of Forum Theatre activity guided by this pivotal event. This is regarded as a historic moment for Moroccan society, particularly for families and women. The revision aims to address critical areas negatively affecting women's rights and family dynamics, highlighting a strong commitment to gender equality, women's empowerment, and social justice. A significant challenge in Morocco's family code reform, or what is locally known as *Moudawana*, lies in reconciling it with traditional norms, as articulated by Wijetunge (2024), 'the difficulty of implementing an in-depth reform constitutes a societal issue that clashes with traditional values and the established order'.

The current revision focuses on strengthening legal protections for women, particularly in addressing gender-based violence, economic rights, and inheritance (Medias24 2023; Wijetunge 2024). It attempts to bridge the gaps that have perpetuated gender inequality and ensure women's access to justice. Additionally, the reform seeks to enhance women's economic and social security, particularly for divorced or widowed individuals, by granting them greater access to property and inheritance rights (Medias24 2023; Wijetunge 2024).

It is therefore reasonable to inquire about the perception of the broader Moroccan population regarding the related reforms and embedded social norms. Since the reform started in 2004, civil society is expected to play a crucial educational role, particularly in the country's underprivileged and rural regions, by raising awareness among women about the importance of the new code. This effort is especially significant for women in these areas who may face barriers such as limited literacy and the influence of traditional norms. However, the effective implementation of the *Moudawana* necessitated extensive dissemination and media coverage, which was insufficient in the first phase.

Consequently, Moroccan women's awareness of their newly granted rights has remained highly limited (Evrard 2014; Wijetunge 2024).

This paper aims to explore the societal impact and challenges of implementing the more recent *Moudawana* family code reforms in Morocco, focusing on the interplay between traditional norms and gender equality. By analysing action research conducted through the innovative use of Forum Theatre methodology, the study examines how this participatory approach addresses harmful sociocultural norms surrounding women's inheritance, mobility, economic rights, and protection against violence. The research seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of such awareness-raising interventions in empowering women, especially in rural areas, and fostering societal acceptance of legal reforms. Additionally, it aims to highlight the role of youth engagement as a catalyst for promoting gender equality and driving meaningful social change.

Methodology

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), conceived by the Brazilian visionary Augusto Boal, is a form of community-based education that employs theatre as a tool for social transformation (Boal 2004). Originally stemming from Boal's work with peasant and worker communities, it has since evolved into a global practice used for social and political activism, conflict resolution, community building, therapy, and influencing government legislation (Blair 2011; Clark 2009; Courtney and Battye 2018; Enria 2016; Ponnuswami 2013). It has become widely recognised as a powerful tool for fostering critical reflection on harmful societal norms and driving social change.

Drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, TO promotes critical thinking by encouraging analysis rather than passive acceptance, and inquiry instead of definitive answers. Central to its approach is the concept of 'acting' rather than mere discussion. In TO, audience members are not passive spectators but active 'spect-actors' who are invited to engage in the theatrical process, voicing their perspectives on the issues being explored.

Theater of the oppressed showcases a scene or play that depicts a situation of oppression in which the protagonist struggles to find a solution and ultimately fails. 'Spect-actors' are then invited to step into the role of the protagonist on stage, actively exploring and enacting potential solutions, ideas, and strategies. The scenes are complex enough to enable understanding of the situation, among the protagonist and victim families, and other community members (Blair 2011).

ICARDA together with Oxfam and Spect'Act Foundation designed a series of plays aimed at challenging harmful sociocultural norms related to women's inheritance, mobility, economic rights, and protection against violence for inspiring societal change. The themes of the plays were informed by findings from focus groups conducted in 2023 in the regions of Sous-Massa and Fes-Meknes where the play was also conducted. In these focus groups, participants were asked to identify and subsequently identified several inhibiting norms affecting their rural livelihoods, including the stigma and shame associated with women asserting their inheritance rights from male relatives, restrictions on women's mobility,

and the cultural ideal of women remaining at home. In the Souss-Massa region, these norms were particularly restrictive, especially concerning reputational risks tied to women's mobility and work outside the home. The play was showcased in 2024 in two Moroccan regions: Fes-Meknes in the north (four villages) and Souss-Massa in the centre (five villages).

These two plays, performed on nine separate occasions, addressed key themes of entrepreneurship and land inheritance. The first play portrays a woman co-operative member who experiences sexual harassment and violence from an unlicensed taxi driver while travelling to an exhibition to showcase and sell her products. The play also highlights her husband's dismissive attitude towards the incident. The second play focuses on a brother and sister dealing with inheritance issues after their father's death. The brother decides to sell the family's olive farm, promising to provide for his sister's needs, but the sister resists his decision, reflecting the tension between tradition and fairness.

Our play, *She Inherits, She Sells*, comprising of two scenes as per above, embraced the concept that 'anyone can act', inviting audience members to become 'spect-actors' (Enria 2016). The play unfolded in two distinct phases: (1) professional actors performed to present the problem, and (2) the audience actively engaged in enacting possible solutions. Community members, serving as 'spect-actors', took on roles to explore and implement responses to the issues presented in the performance. This was an integral aspect of the methodology, which emphasises audience participation in enacting and resolving real-life social issues. While the performances were impromptu and interactive, the research team facilitated the process to ensure meaningful engagement.

However, some participants, particularly older women, expressed concerns about acting in public due to fears of damaging their reputation within their communities. To address this and ensure their voices were heard, follow-up phone interviews were conducted with 242 respondents who attended the plays (189 women and 53 men) across Souss-Massa and Fes-Meknes to gather their feedback and (on) the impact of the plays (Table 1). The interviews were conducted by experienced enumerators, one man and one woman. The man enumerator interviewed men and the woman interviewed women. The interviews focused on three key questions: (1) whether the topics discussed influenced their perspectives, (2) what actions they believed should follow the discussions (e.g. the husband's behaviour in the first play and the brother's decision in the second), and (3) their views on the effectiveness of Forum Theatre in transforming societal perceptions of women's roles and rights. The analysis considered gender, age, and regional differences to draw meaningful insights.

Table 1: Age and gender distribution of survey participants per region in March-June 2024

	Souss-Massa	Fes-Meknes	Total
Women	77	112	189
Age ≤25	33	40	73
Age >25	44	72	116
Men	37	16	53
Age ≤25	18	16	34
Age >25	19	0	19
Total	114	128	242

Recognising that knowledge is shaped by power dynamics (Enria 2016), the plays encouraged men to participate, share solutions, and listen to women's perspectives, followed by evaluations of their experiences. Approximately 18 women and 12 men from the Sousse-Massa region participated in the 'on-stage' performances, while around 34 women and nine men took part in the Fes-Meknes region. The proceedings were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analysed.

Taken together, the plays draw on Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre methodology, which transforms theatre into an accessible platform for ordinary citizens to engage with depictions of oppression and conflict. This form of theatre fosters open-minded thinking and creative problem-solving, offering a distinctive opportunity to explore practical solutions through collective reflection and dialogue.

To generate findings from this study, we used inductive theme identification and explanation building from the interviews and participant observation data. Inductive thematic analysis entails allowing the themes to emerge from the data (Leavy 2022). We wanted to gather feedback and assess the impacts of the plays, and to determine whether participants reported a change in their way of thinking. We also wanted to gather recommendations for our TO approach. The findings section details participants' changes in opinions and thoughts on entrepreneurship and inheritance, emphasising the implication of Forum Theatre on changing societal norms and achieving gender equality. In the following sections, reflections on the TO approach by participants and the means to improve it are presented. We carefully selected impactful quotes to represent both dominant and less-common perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive reflection of the discussions. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of respondents, and all interviews proceeded only after obtaining oral consent, which was documented in writing.

Entrepreneurship

In the first scene of the play, which explored marital violence and economic independence, audience interventions overwhelmingly sided with the woman who worked in a local co-operative, in the role of producing and selling couscous, as a vital means of asserting her independence. The discussion rejected the husband's disapproval of her work, emphasising that economic autonomy is essential for women's well-being. Participants stressed that women should have control over their earnings and be able to make decisions without the interference of men. The play transcripts revealed that economic autonomy was a recurring theme, particularly for women whose earnings were controlled by their husbands. One woman questioned why men are automatically considered responsible for managing household finances, arguing that 'this is our money, and we should be able to manage it because we have our own expenses'. Encouraging women's involvement in co-operatives was recognised as a means to enhance their financial independence and lessen their reliance on men.

The discussion also highlighted blame-shifting regarding harassment. Many participants during the play felt that the husband was responsible for his wife's harassment because he failed to accompany her. Some also argued that women only need to work

when their husbands do not provide enough financial support. The idea that women should be held accountable for their own harassment was also present. One man stated, 'We agreed that she would work inside the co-operative, not travel to sell products.' Another insisted that women's exposure to harassment was a result of their mobility, stating, 'The wife should apologise and ask for forgiveness from her husband because the behaviour she did [exhibited] is not good at all. The wife should not go to the market alone.' Unlike in traditional narratives where women are blamed for harassment, this discussion challenged the husband's failure to protect and support his wife.

Resistance to women's participation in business expos was another theme, particularly among men who upheld the belief in cloistering – the idea that women should remain within confined, socially acceptable spaces. One participant claimed, 'A woman's role is to work inside the co-operative, not to go far from the village to sell products.' While some women internalised this norm, accepting mobility restrictions as a protective measure, others viewed it as a significant barrier to their economic agency.

Encouragingly, young men were more open to gender equality, recognising that household responsibilities should be shared. Some even supported men assisting with domestic chores so women could also work. As one young man stated, 'If a woman wants to work, the husband must support her at home. It is his duty to do so.' However, older participants remained more traditional, emphasising the belief that men should be the primary providers while women should focus on domestic roles. One participant stated, 'The husband is responsible for his wife; she must obey him, respect him, and stay out of trouble.'

The role of the husband as the primary financial manager was one of the key norms challenged by the play. Discussions also questioned women's right to freedom of movement and protection from violence. Some participants suggested NGO involvement to provide legal support for women facing abuse, while others argued that calling the police should be an option for women in such situations. However, many husbands opposed legal action, fearing *fadiha* (scandal), and insisting that such matters should remain private.

The differences in opinion between men and women were stark. While two men stated that a wife's role was to remain within the co-operative, two women fully supported women's right to work without restrictions. Other husbands attempted to justify their control over their wives' mobility and earnings, with one man stating, 'You cannot go to the market and sell and talk to other men.' Two other husbands emphasised, 'We agreed to work together on resolving life problems, but not for her to sell far away.'

These findings illustrate the deep-rooted tensions surrounding women's economic participation and mobility. While younger participants challenged traditional gender norms, older men reaffirmed their authority over women's work and earnings. The discussion revealed a clear generational divide, with younger women and men more willing to support financial independence and gender equality. However, the ideal of cloistering remained largely unchallenged, suggesting that further interventions are needed to shift societal perceptions about women's mobility and autonomy.

The play also sparked conversations around violence against women, with many stressing the need for legal, medical, psychological, and social support services to protect women from harassment and abuse. Despite this, some women also internalised cloistering as a protective

norm, acknowledging that their agency was only evoked when they were forced to work out of necessity. This perspective reflects the concept of the ‘patriarchal bargain’ (Kandiyoti 1988), where women accept restrictions on their freedom in exchange for financial and social security. However, in this context, that bargain appeared to be breaking down, as women increasingly asserted control over their income by selling their own products.

Changes in thinking around financial autonomy and gender-based violence

Phone interviews revealed that the discussions that followed the plays helped the audience better understand the realities faced by rural working women, where traditional norms place responsibility and blame on women rather than holding perpetrators accountable. This sentiment was captured by one participant, who stated: ‘This is how society views women, and when women are harassed and raped, they do not blame the man – all the blame and reproach falls on the woman’ (interview, Asma, 31 years old, Souss-Massa, 25 March 2024).

Findings revealed that 100 participants (81 women and 19 men) – representing 41 per cent of the 242 surveyed – reported a shift in their thinking as a result of the first play and subsequent discussions. Notably, young men were more likely than older men to reconsider their views. Among the male participants, 36 per cent ($n = 53$) changed their perspective, with a higher proportion of young men (63 per cent of those aged 25 or younger) showing openness to new ideas. Similarly, 43 per cent ($n = 189$) of the women participants reported a change in thinking, 35 per cent of whom were under the age of 25.

One young woman reflected on how her perception changed:

At first, I was inclined to blame the woman for going out so early. However, after thinking deeply about the situation, I realised that her going out at this time can be justified due to her responsibilities inside and outside the house while the husband only works outside the house. If the husband was truly an equal partner, he would have accompanied her and provided her with the necessary support, whether by providing a respectable driver to take her or by personally ensuring she reaches the exhibition safely. (Interview, Layla, 20 years old, Fes-Meknes, 28 May 2024)

Similarly, a young man highlighted the need for community support for working women, stating:

I realised that women first need the support of their husbands, their families, and their external environment, because many women are affected by their surroundings, which makes them afraid to speak out about what has happened to them. They may have been victims of violence, but they cannot say it for fear of their families and husbands. Society needs to be more supportive and understanding of working women, especially those who work in co-operatives. (Interview, Karim, 21 years old, Souss-Massa, 18 June 2024)

Several participants openly expressed their new perspectives on the topic. One young man shared, ‘My thinking has changed a lot. I am in favour of women working and their husbands supporting them’ (interview, Yasin, 15 years old, Souss-Massa, 1 March 2024). Similarly, a young woman reflected, ‘My thinking has honestly changed after looking at the situation carefully’ (interview, Layla, 20 years old, Fes-Meknes, 28 May 2024).

One of the positive findings was the unanimous condemnation of the harasser and the husband's dismissive behaviour. A young man noted, 'What changed was my perception of the youth and attendees who defended the woman in a good way. They all condemned the husband's behaviour and rejected what he did' (interview, Adam, 19 years old, Souss-Massa, 19 June 2024). Women also felt empowered to speak more openly, as one man observed, 'I was happy to see the women of the village expressing themselves comfortably and expressively in the presence of men, which is a positive thing' (interview, Ismail, 47 years old, Souss-Massa, 20 March 2024).

Despite these shifts in perspective, some participants – both men and women – remained unchanged in their beliefs, reinforcing traditional gender norms. These individuals did not support violence but justified certain patriarchal attitudes, arguing that women should adhere to religious and cultural expectations. One man insisted that women have the right to work but should remain obedient, enacting religion as a justification for their compliance:

I agree that women have the right to work, but without exceeding the limits of religion. If the husband orders his wife to stay at home and take care of the children, and he is responsible for providing for her needs and those of the house, it makes sense for her to abide by this request. This is not obedience to the husband in the absolute sense, as we are not obliged to obey without thinking, but compliance with such things is out of reverence for God. Even if the husband does not treat his wife properly, the wife can choose between patience and endurance or divorce and move on with her life. (Interview, Mustapha, 24 years old, Fes-Meknes, 30 April 2024)

Some participants framed male control as a form of protection rather than restriction, reinforcing the belief that a husband has the right to dictate his wife's movements to safeguard family honour. One woman expressed this sentiment, stating:

The husband reacted correctly because he only feared for his wife, and his reaction is natural and manly. Any man would act like him and defend his honour. After the discussion, the husband should talk to his wife at home and tell her not to go again with any man alone, and to stay at home and accept and be satisfied with what God has given her with her husband. (Interview, Halima, 40 years old, Souss-Massa, 17 June 2024)

Similarly, a 40-year-old woman attributed the harassment to the victim's actions, rather than questioning male behaviour:

The matter is not as simple as that. The woman made some mistakes, and we should all agree that going out at such an early hour was a mistake. She should have thought about renting a hotel or at least bringing a woman or a child with her or even finding a male escort. I think this mistake that she made is entirely the woman's fault, and the co-operative is also responsible for not providing specialised transportation. (Interview, Mariam, 40 years old, Fes-Meknes, 29 April 2024)

Some participants still insisted that women should take precautions to avoid harassment, shifting blame away from men's actions. One participant even suggested that the harassed woman owed her husband an apology, claiming:

The wife should apologise and ask for forgiveness from her husband because the behaviour she did is not good at all and shows a lack of respect towards him. She should ask her husband to

accompany her and stay with her in the market to sell couscous, because in the market she can also be harassed by men. (Interview, Hasan, 26 years old, Souss-Massa, 18 June 2024)

Land rights/inheritance

The second scene of the play, which focused on inheritance rights, sparked divergent opinions among participants, reflecting deep-rooted cultural and religious influences. These differences were particularly pronounced between the Souss-Massa and Fes-Meknes regions. In Souss-Massa, the majority of participants adhered to traditional inheritance laws based on Islamic Sharia, with 14 out of 25 participants advocating for the application of religious provisions. Meanwhile, seven individuals supported equal inheritance rights, arguing that sisters should receive the same share as their brothers. One participant proposed economic empowerment for women as an alternative to land inheritance, emphasising the importance of financial independence through employment.

In contrast, participants in Fes-Meknes showed stronger support for equal inheritance, with all eight participants advocating for equal distribution between brothers and sisters. However, two participants opposed this view, maintaining that Islamic inheritance laws should be preserved to ensure financial ties between men and women family members. Another group rejected the idea of selling inherited land as a solution, instead proposing women's financial empowerment through workforce participation.

A comparative analysis of interventions revealed regional variations in attitudes towards inheritance reform. In Souss-Massa, approximately 50 per cent of participants supported Islamic Sharia, while 40 per cent supported equal inheritance distribution. In Fes-Meknes, 45 per cent of participants favoured inheritance equality, with 35 per cent supporting Sharia-based inheritance laws. Overall, 52 per cent of participants endorsed equal inheritance rights, while 48 per cent remained aligned with religious inheritance practices.

Although the majority of participants leaned towards Sharia-based inheritance laws, discussions revealed a gradual shift in attitudes, particularly among younger participants. In two out of ten performances, actors challenged the norm that brothers receive double the inheritance of their sisters, sparking further debate.

Participants proposed several potential solutions to address inheritance disparities. Many suggested that fathers should proactively divide their land before their death, ensuring fair distribution and reducing family disputes. Some argued that since brothers already inherit double their sisters' share, they should voluntarily allow their sisters to claim their rightful portion. Others recommended including women relatives, such as aunts, in inheritance decisions, while some suggested that official registration authorities should require the sister's approval before allowing any sale of inherited land.

Changes in thinking on land rights

The play's narrative resonated deeply with participants, as inheritance remains a highly sensitive topic in rural areas, where religious traditions and cultural norms continue to shape perceptions of land ownership.

For many, inheritance laws remain non-negotiable, as reflected in statements such as ‘Inheritance is one of the things that Islam has legalised and defined’ (interview, Lamia, 36 years old, Fes-Meknes, 30 April 2024). Some participants resisted any discussion that challenged the traditional system, arguing that suggesting equal inheritance was contrary to religious law. One young man stated:

There is a specific religious text that gives each person his or her right. The attempt by some members of the audience to put forward some unsound ideas regarding the equal distribution of land is contrary to religion and bothers me because the text is very clear. (Interview, Brahim, 22 years old, Souss-Massa, 1 March 2024)

However, the play and the ensuing discussion helped some participants recognise the challenges women face in claiming their inheritance. Many women are pressured into giving up their share to their brothers, often to prevent the land from passing to their husbands, whom families consider outsiders. One young man defended this practice, saying, ‘The brother has more right to inherit than his brother-in-law, so it is better for the sister to give up her inheritance to her brother and for the brother-in-law to take his father’s inheritance’ (interview, Salah, 16 years old, Fes-Meknes, 6 May 2024).

Despite these cultural and religious concerns, the play influenced the thinking of 70 participants (59 women and 11 men), representing 29 per cent of those surveyed. Among men, 21 per cent ($n = 53$) reported some change in perspective, with 55 per cent ($n = 11$) of these individuals under 25 years old. Among women, 31 per cent ($n = 189$) expressed a shift in thinking, with 29 per cent ($n = 59$) of those respondents being under 25 years old.

For some women, the play provided the first opportunity to openly discuss inheritance rights. One participant explained how her perspective evolved: ‘Yes, before, I was afraid to talk about inheritance because for us, it’s shameful for a woman to claim her right to inheritance, but now I can talk about it normally and confidently’ (interview, Malika, 48 years old, Souss-Massa, 25 March 2024). Others reported a new understanding of the importance of equal inheritance, as expressed by one young man: ‘The themes of this play positively influenced my thinking and forced me to revise my views on the concept of family and the value of inheritance’ (interview, Sana, 17 years old, Souss-Massa, 26 March 2024).

Although no one outright denied a woman’s right to inherit, many still viewed it as shameful for a woman to claim her share, especially if it meant the land might pass outside the male lineage. However, a growing number of women – especially younger generations – insisted on defending their rights. As one woman stated, ‘She must defend her right and not let her male siblings control it’ (interview, Aicha, 41 years old, Souss-Massa, 27 March 2024).

A significant shift was the emergence of young women advocating for legal action to protect their rights. One participant emphasised the need for women to assert their claims through the legal system: ‘The woman should take legal action against her brother to obtain her right legally because her brother won’t give her right and will forget over time, and the sister will lose, as happened to my mother’ (interview, Dalila, 19 years old, Fes-Meknes, 7 May 2024).

This determination was echoed by another participant, who stressed that women must actively claim their inheritance rather than remain silent:

I now believe very much in the importance of women getting their right to inheritance and being given what they deserve. She should not refuse her right, but she should demand it and not remain silent even if her right is not granted. If she chooses to remain silent, there will be a repetition of such violations against other women. So, women must be braver, say no, and strongly defend their rights. (Interview, Amani, 21 years old, Souss-Massa, 18 June 2024)

One practical solution proposed was encouraging fathers to write wills before their death, to prevent disputes between sons and daughters. A participant suggested:

It is necessary to have a will that preserves the children's rights after death. I think this is something that should continue and should be in place because if there was a will, things would not have come to this point of conflict regarding the brother-sister relationship. (Interview, Nisrine, 16 years old, Fes-Meknes, 29 April 2024)

Participants' thoughts and recommendations for the theatre approach

Participants overwhelmingly appreciated the interactive nature of Forum Theatre, highlighting its effectiveness in addressing taboo topics and engaging audiences in meaningful discussions. Both men and women, across different age groups, found the format engaging and impactful, as it allowed them not only to observe but also to actively participate in conversations about women's rights, inheritance, and economic independence.

Many participants emphasised the need for continued and frequent performances, warning that a one-time intervention may not create lasting impact. They stressed that ongoing engagements are necessary to reinforce awareness and promote societal change. As one young woman stated:

I believe that if such shows continue to be organised, they will play an important role in raising awareness and influencing society in the future. However, we must keep in mind that not repeating such presentations may lead to forgetting, and forgetting can minimise impact and change. (Interview, Samira, 16 years old, Fes-Meknes, 14 May 2024)

Theatre was widely recognised as a powerful tool for educating communities about legal and social issues, particularly women's rights. Participants noted that its ability to blend entertainment with education made it an effective medium for spreading awareness. One woman emphasised this point, saying:

Theatre can be an effective way to educate women about their rights and their role in society. It has a great impact because it combines entertainment and education. Through comedy and humour, it conveys important messages, helping to expand awareness and change culture. (Interview, Mouna, 30 years old, Fes-Meknes, 14 May 2024)

The interactive nature of the performances was especially well-received, as it encouraged open dialogue and community engagement. Many participants appreciated that they could actively express their views and debate social norms, rather than merely watching a scripted performance. A young man reflected on this, stating:

[Forum] Theatre is an effective way to change collective thinking about women's roles in society. It encourages community dialogue, sheds light on women's issues, and motivates everyone to

participate. Even those who don't speak out have an opinion on the subject. (Interview, Nabil, 23 years old, Souss-Massa, 28 February 2024)

However, some participants pointed out challenges in conservative rural areas, where certain messages might be misunderstood or resisted. They suggested that future plays be carefully adapted to their audiences to ensure that their messages are clearly communicated and culturally sensitive. As one older participant explained:

There are some obstacles associated with the conservative mentality of some people in rural areas who may not easily understand some messages when they are presented in an artistic way. However, with time, these efforts will lead to a change in thinking and awareness. (Interview, Ismail, 47 years old, Souss-Massa, 20 March 2024)

Despite the overall positive reception, some participants expressed discomfort with discussions that challenged religious norms, particularly around inheritance equality. Certain individuals strongly opposed the idea of women receiving equal inheritance, seeing it as a direct challenge to religious teachings. One participant voiced this concern, stating, 'Sometimes inappropriate ideas are conveyed, such as the suggestion that the girl should get equal shares to their brothers, which is contrary to Islamic Sharia' (interview, Wafa, 15 years old, Fes-Meknes, 30 April 2024). These concerns suggest that future plays should continue to encourage respectful dialogue, while also recognising and addressing deeply held beliefs to facilitate gradual shifts in societal norms.

Participants also expressed a desire for the plays to explore additional themes and issues relevant to their communities. Many suggested expanding the performances to address broader gender-related challenges, legal rights, and economic empowerment strategies for women. They also recommended incorporating new storytelling techniques and interactive elements to keep the performances fresh and engaging.

Discussion and conclusion

While traditional norms remain influential, particularly in rural areas, the Forum Theatre approach has opened spaces for dialogue and challenged entrenched gender norms. However, resistance to change remains strong, particularly among older generations and more conservative participants, raising important questions about the limitations and challenges of this intervention. While the plays were separate, they are inherently connected, as inheritance and work are deeply inter-related. Women's ability to claim and control inherited assets directly influences their economic independence, while their participation in the workforce shapes their financial autonomy and strengthens their ability to challenge discriminatory inheritance practices.

One of the most significant challenges encountered was the sensitivity of discussing inheritance rights in the context of Islamic law. While some participants welcomed the discussion on gender equality, others viewed it as crossing religious boundaries. Many defended the status quo, arguing that inheritance is clearly defined in Islamic teachings and should not be questioned. As one participant stated, 'Sometimes inappropriate ideas are conveyed, such as the suggestion that the girl should get equal

shares to their brothers, which is contrary to Islamic Sharia' (interview, Wafa, 15 years old, Fes-Meknes, 30 April 2024). These strong reactions indicate a deep polarisation of Moroccan society on sensitive subjects.

Despite this resistance, younger participants, particularly women, began to question these norms, with some openly advocating for legal action to claim their rights. One young woman expressed, 'The woman should take legal action against her brother to obtain her right legally because her brother won't give her right and will forget over time, and the sister will lose, as happened to my mother' (interview, Dalila, 19 years old, Fes-Meknes, 7 May 2024). This shift in perspective suggests that awareness-raising efforts are slowly reshaping attitudes, yet interpretations of religion and cultural barriers still present significant challenges in advancing women's rights.

The challenge of male engagement

Another major limitation of the intervention was the low participation of men. The majority of participants were women, largely because recruitment was conducted through women's co-operatives, resulting in a gender imbalance in representation. While some men did engage in discussions, their numbers remained relatively low, making it difficult to gauge whether attitudes among men are shifting to the same extent as they are among women. This imbalance is concerning, as achieving gender equality requires the active participation of men, particularly in patriarchal societies where men often control household decisions and economic resources.

Participants also highlighted that many men still perceive women's economic participation as a response to male inadequacy rather than a right. The dominant discourse remains that 'the man is the provider', and when a woman works, it is because the man is failing to provide adequately. This pattern is not unique to Morocco, as similar findings have been reported in Egypt (Najjar et al. 2017). This suggests that future interventions must target men more deliberately, creating spaces where they can critically engage with these gender norms rather than viewing women's empowerment as a threat to their role as providers.

Emotional interaction and awareness-raising

A key success of the play was its ability to evoke emotional engagement from the audience, fostering empathy and deeper reflection. The ability of the actors and participants to portray emotions, particularly during interventions by women, had a strong impact on both men and women spectators. In some cases, the emotional weight of personal experiences led to tears and collective moments of empathy, reinforcing the power of storytelling in challenging norms.

One striking example of this occurred during the Azrou performance in the second scene, when a woman named 'Hanan' rejected the unequal division of inheritance with her brothers. As she shared her experience of losing familial relationships due to property disputes, her story triggered visible distress and emotional responses among the audience,

which were then corroborated during side talks. Even though she was unable to resolve her own situation, the moment sparked deep reflection and widespread empathy.

This emotional engagement aligns with the principles of Forum Theatre, as described by Augusto Boal, who argued that emotional empathy can encourage positive interaction. However, he also warned that emotional responses alone are not enough – they must be paired with actionable strategies for change. This suggests that while the intervention successfully provoked empathy, future efforts must translate this emotional impact into concrete measures or commitment from the community to support women's rights.

In addition to emotional engagement, the play also contributed to raising awareness about women's rights and combating gender-based discrimination. A particularly powerful intervention came from a woman named Fatima, who highlighted the role of institutions in supporting women's legal struggles. She introduced her work at The Center for Assistance to Women and Girls, an organisation that provides support to victims of domestic violence and legal challenges. Such contributions reinforce the importance of integrating community-based legal support into future awareness initiatives.

Challenges in participation and negative responses

Despite the success in sparking discussion, certain challenges limited the effectiveness of the intervention. One issue was women's reluctance to actively participate, even in a setting designed to encourage open dialogue. While some women, especially young women, spoke out with confidence, others hesitated to share their opinions, reflecting the ongoing societal pressure to remain silent on sensitive topics. This trend was particularly notable in the Souss-Massa performances, where cultural norms and historical inheritance traditions appear to have deeper roots.

Additionally, some participants responded negatively, defending patriarchal inheritance laws, for example, as natural realities rather than social constructs. The study underscores the need for long-term awareness campaigns, as isolated interventions may not be sufficient to dismantle deeply entrenched patriarchal norms.

Conclusion: the power and limits of theatre-based interventions

The findings demonstrate that Forum Theatre is a powerful tool for initiating discussions on gender norms, economic empowerment, and inheritance rights. The intervention succeeded in sparking conversations, particularly among younger participants, who were more open to questioning traditional beliefs. However, the study also highlights several challenges that must be addressed in future interventions.

First, religious boundaries remain a major constraint, with deep resistance to discussions that challenge interpretations of Islamic inheritance laws. This highlights the need for carefully designed messaging that balances cultural sensitivity with advocacy for women's rights. Second, the limited participation of men underscores the need to actively recruit male participants, ensuring that discussions around gender norms are inclusive

and transformative. Third, entrenched patriarchal control over women's economic roles means that simply promoting women's employment and inheritance rights is not enough – interventions must also challenge the underlying power structures that restrict women's autonomy.

The two issues – financial autonomy through entrepreneurship and financial security through inheritance rights – are deeply interconnected, yet they elicited very different levels of acceptance from the community. The play-based discussions revealed that economic participation (entrepreneurship) was more readily accepted because it frames women's labour as a contribution to household well-being, often within male-dominated economic structures. In contrast, inheritance rights challenge structural, legal, and religious norms, making them less likely to be easily accepted. The former allows for incremental change within existing patriarchal frameworks, while the latter directly challenges deep-seated beliefs about male financial authority and inheritance laws rooted in religious doctrine.

This contrast highlights the potential of community-based creative initiatives like Forum Theatre to reveal where resistance to gender equality is strongest. By exposing these tensions, the intervention provided a space for reflection and dialogue on how gender norms operate at different levels – some more malleable than others. These insights reinforce the need for intensified, long-term community engagement in addressing structural inequalities, particularly inheritance, where legal reforms may be required to facilitate meaningful change.

Despite these challenges, the emotional impact of the play and the growing willingness of younger generations to challenge traditional norms signal a gradual shift in perspectives. Future interventions should focus on translating emotional responses into legal and more concrete action, engaging both men and women more actively, and ensuring that awareness-raising efforts lead to concrete change.

While it is true that single or short-term interventions may not be sufficient to catalyse immediate and widespread social change, our findings indicate that changes in thinking are already occurring, particularly among younger participants. These cognitive shifts often serve as precursors to behavioural change, suggesting that interventions like Forum Theatre lay the foundation for long-term transformation. Participants expressed a deeper understanding of women's rights, economic independence, and mobility. Some young men reconsidered their views on gender roles, while many women reported greater confidence in asserting their rights.

Additionally, the evidence from post-performance discussions and interviews suggests that Forum Theatre can initiate lasting change, rather than merely serving as a one-time awareness-raising event. To maximise its impact, such interventions should be sustained and reinforced through complementary efforts, such as legal advocacy, community dialogues, and institutional support. Future research should examine how repeated exposure to such interventions influences long-term shifts in social norms and behaviours.

Ultimately, Kabeer (2024) argues that autonomy empowers individuals not only to make economic choices but also to shape the broader social and economic structures of society. Future interventions should move beyond awareness-raising and towards concrete legal and social measures that empower women not just to work, but to fully control their financial

resources and inheritance rights. By addressing these challenges and opportunities, future initiatives can build on the success of this intervention, ensuring that Forum Theatre serves not just as a tool for discussion but as a catalyst for lasting gender equality and social change.

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