

Access to good-quality, consistent education for all children and young people is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2020). Education plays a central role in reducing poverty, promoting gender equality, and enabling social participation. However, despite sustained international commitment, significant inequalities in access and quality persist globally (UNICEF, 2021). These inequalities are particularly pronounced in low- and middle-income countries, where structural factors such as poverty, geography, and historical marginalisation combine to shape childrens educational experiences.

This essay critically explores these challenges through a focus on Morocco, examining the barriers faced by children and young people living in rural communities in the Atlas Mountains, with particular attention to gendered access to education and rural poverty linked to labour migration. The essay argues that educational exclusion in these contexts is not the result of individual or cultural choice alone but instead is created by structural inequalities shaped by post-colonial legacies, and limited policy reach.

Morocco has made measurable progress in increasing school enrolment, particularly at the primary level. According to data, Morocco has achieved near-universal participation in primary education, with enrolment reaching approximately 99 per cent in recent years. (World Bank, 2019). However, participation declines sharply at higher levels of education. World Bank statistics indicate that the enrolment for secondary education remains significantly lower, at around 64 per cent, highlighting the substantial challenge of progression beyond primary school. (World Bank, 2019). These national averages mask persistent inequalities, particularly between urban and rural populations, where access to schooling is constricted by poverty, distance, and limited educational infrastructure. Taken together, these indicators provide a snapshot of the current state of access to education in Morocco, highlighting near-universal primary enrolment alongside significant challenges in retention and progression, particularly beyond primary education.

Such disparities raise questions regarding the extent to which current educational provision in Morocco fulfils children's rights to education, as outlined in Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989, Article 28-29). It also contributes to the achievement of the United Nations (2015) Sustainable Goal 4, which seeks to ensure inclusive and quality education for all.

Rural poverty and geographic isolation constitute significant structural barriers to educational access and continuity for children and young people living in the Atlas Mountain regions of Morocco. Many households in these areas depend on agriculture and informal economic activities, resulting in unstable incomes and vulnerability to economic shock (World Bank, 2025). In such contexts, education is often perceived as a long-term investment that competes with immediate household survival needs. The direct costs of schooling, including learning materials and transport, alongside indirect costs associated with the loss of the child's labour within the household, can undermine regular school attendance and increase the likelihood of dropout, particularly beyond primary education (UNESCO, 2020).

As a response to persistent poverty, labour migration has become a common household strategy in rural Morocco. Migration to urban centres or other regions in search of employment can provide essential remittances that support household survival. However, it frequently disrupts children's educational involvement due to prolonged absence, irregular attendance, or early withdrawal from school (UNICEF, 2021). In some cases, children and young people engage in paid or unpaid labour to supplement household income, further limiting their ability to participate consistently in education.

Sen (1999) argues that such circumstances can be understood as restricting children's freedoms to pursue education. In the context of rural Morocco, economic necessity narrows the range of real educational choices available to families, meaning that school participation is constrained not by a lack of aspiration but by structural deprivation. From a rights-based perspective, these conditions challenge not only the accessibility under Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, but also the aims of education outlined in Article 29 of the Convention, which emphasises development of the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities (United Nations, 1989). Rural poverty and labour migration are therefore not solely individual household decisions but structural constraints that undermine the application of children's educational rights in remote mountain communities.

Gender norms and structural inequalities significantly shape how rural and labour migration affect children's education in the Atlas Mountain regions of Morocco. Although economic hardship constrains opportunities for many children, girls in rural communities are much more likely to be affected by educational interruption and early withdrawal. Cultural expectations surrounding domestic labour and caregiving frequently

position girls as primary contributors to household survival, particularly when adult family members migrate for employment (UNICEF, 2021). Long distances to secondary schools, combined with concerns about safety and social reputation, further restrict girls' consistent attendance in remote mountainous areas (UNESCO, 2020). Poverty therefore does not operate in a gender-neutral manner, rather, it works alongside deeply rooted social norms to reinforce unequal access to education.

From a sociological perspective, social reproduction theory provides insight into how these inequalities persist across generations rather than being resolved through schooling. Bourdieu (1986) argues that education systems can reinforce existing social hierarchies by privileging those who possess greater economic and cultural capital. Cultural capital refers not simply to knowledge, but to the language, behaviours, skills and dispositions that are valued within social institutions. As Ramsey (2025) explains, Bourdieu recognised a direct relationship between cultural capital and social class, suggesting that children born into wealthier families are more likely to grow up embodying the forms of knowledge and confidence that aligns with school expectations, giving them an educational advantage.

In the context of rural Morocco, limited household income, lower levels of parental educational attainment, and gendered divisions of labour restrict the opportunities available to children particularly girls, to accumulate the forms of cultural capital recognised and rewarded within formal education (Lewin, 2009). Girls who are expected to prioritise domestic labour may have fewer opportunities to develop academic skills, attend school consistently, or engage in activities that support further educational progression. As a result, their educational paths are more vulnerable to interruption, particularly at secondary level.

Research on education inequality highlights how girls in rural and marginalised contexts often face compounded disadvantages due to structural poverty and gendered household responsibilities (Humanium, 2017). In Morocco specifically, studies show that gender gaps in educational attainment are more pronounced in rural areas, with girls facing lower transitions to secondary schooling compared to boys, partly due to limited school supply and socio-cultural expectations (Fadil, 2018).

As Unterhalter (2009) argues, equity in education requires more than equal enrolment, it requires changes to the structural constraints that limit real opportunities for everyone to learn and succeed. These patterns therefor suggest that poverty interacts with gender expectations to produce unequal educational outcomes, which reinforces social hierarchies.

In response to persistent educational inequalities, the Moroccan government has introduced a range of policy initiatives aimed at expanding access and improving equity, particularly in rural areas. The 'Strategic Vision for Education Reform 2015-2030' prioritises universal access, quality improvement, and greater inclusion (Ministry of National Education, 2015). This vision aligns with the 'Sustainable Development Goal 4' and international child's rights obligations (United Nations, 2015).

A key intervention has been the 'Tayssir conditional cash transfer programme', which provides financial support to low-income families on the condition of regular school attendance (Benhassine et al, 2015). Evidence suggests that Tayssir has contributed to improved enrolment and attendance at the primary level, particularly in rural communities where economic support is rare (UNICEF Morocco, 2025). Similarly, rural boarding facilities and initiatives such as 'Dar Taliba', aim to mitigate the impact of geographic isolation by providing accommodation for girls who live far from secondary schools (Foundation Mohammed V For Solidarity, 2026).

However, while these interventions demonstrate measurable progress in expanding access to schooling, their capacity to address the deeper structural inequalities identified earlier in this essay remains limited. Conditional cash transfers may reduce short-term financial pressures, yet they do not transform the economic vulnerability that drives labour migration or gendered household labour expectations. As UNESCO (2020) notes, increased enrolment does not automatically translate into sustained attendance, quality learning outcomes, or gender equality progression. Furthermore, access-focused reforms risk overlooking disparities in educational quality, teacher distribution and resources in remote mountain regions. Without investment in rural economic development, culturally responsive curriculum and long-term gender sensitive strategies, policy interventions fail to address the structural causes that relate to exclusion.

From a rights-based perspective, this raises important questions regarding whether such interventions fully realise the intent of Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC, which empathises not only access but meaningful participation and holistic development of the child (United Nations, 1989). While Morocco's collaboration with international organisations such as UNICEF and UNESCO reflects alignment with global education frameworks, the persistence of rural gender disparities suggests that structural barriers remain only partially addressed.

While Morocco's education reforms reflect commitments to equity and international rights frameworks, they must also be situated within the

broader dynamics of global education governance. As a lower-middle income country operating within international development systems, Morocco's reform policy priorities are not only shaped by domestic needs but also highly influenced by global agendas such as SDG4, and funding partnerships with organisations including UNICEF. While such partnerships can provide financial and technical support, there is an argument that global education reforms often emphasise measurable outcomes, such as enrolment and attendance, over deeper structural transformation (Tikly, 2019). This emphasis on quantifiable outcomes can narrow the focus of reform towards performance metrics rather than addressing historically embedded inequalities affecting rural and marginalised communities.

From a postcolonial perspective, education systems in formerly colonised contexts frequently reflect inherited institutional models that do not consider local cultural, linguistic and socio-economic realities. In Morocco, rural Amazigh communities in the Atlas Mountains have historically experienced marginalisation within national education structures, including limited incorporation of Amazigh language and uneven distribution of educational resources (Ennaji, 2005).

Although the 2011 Constitution formally recognised Amazigh as an official language (Moroccan Constitution, 2011), implementation within rural schooling remains inconsistent, particularly where teacher training and curriculum adaptation are limited (UNESCO, 2020). As Andreotti (2011) argues, development initiatives that fail to interrogate underlying power relations risk reproducing global hierarchies rather than dismantling them. In this sense, alignment with international benchmarks may symbolise progress, yet leave intact the structural conditions, such as rural poverty, gendered labour expectations and regional marginalisation that constrain educational opportunity in the Atlas Mountains.

This critique does not imply that international cooperation is inherently problematic. Partnerships with organisations such as UNICEF and UNESCO have supported reform efforts in Morocco. However, global education governance often prioritises measurable targets, such as enrolment and completion rates, over structural transformation (Tikly, 2016). While such indicators are central to monitoring progress under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015), they may obscure persistent regional and socio-economic inequalities that are less easily identified.

If educational exclusion in rural Morocco is rooted in structural inequality rather than individual choice, reform must extend beyond expanding access to schooling and instead address the socio-economic

conditions that constrain children's real educational opportunities. Drawing on the capability approach, Sen (1999) emphasises that development should expand individuals' freedoms, not merely provide formal entitlements. This perspective has been widely applied to education policy, Walker (2006) argues that schooling should enhance learners capabilities to live valuable lives, rather than simply increase enrolment.

As Lewin (2007) notes, sustainable educational expansion in low and middle-income contexts requires simultaneous attention to economic vulnerability and progression beyond primary schooling. A more transformative approach would require economic development, employment opportunities, and social protection systems that reduce reliance on child labour and labour migration.

Research on gender and development further demonstrates that girl's educational exclusion is often tied to unpaid domestic labour and care responsibilities within households (Kabeer, 2005). Policies should therefore recognise these gendered burdens and consider measures such as flexible schooling structures, childcare support and improved transport and safety to reduce the extra burdens faced by girls in rural communities.

Ultimately, a structurally informed approach would integrate education reform with broader rural development strategies, ensuring that children's access to schooling is supported by economic stability, gender equality and cultural inclusion. Such an approach moves beyond formal participation toward the substantive realisation of children's rights, enabling young people in the Atlas Mountains not only to attend school, but to benefit from education in ways that expand their long-term opportunities and social participation (Robeyns, 2006).

Beyond the questions of access and quality, a critical issue concerns the extent to which education in rural Morocco translates into meaningful economic opportunity and improvement. While schooling is often posed as a pathway out of poverty, research across low and middle-income contexts highlight a persistent gap between educational expansion and labour market increase (Lewin, 2007). In Morocco, youth unemployment remains comparatively high, particularly among young people with solely secondary qualifications (World Bank, 2025). This raises important questions about whether educational participation alone is sufficient to disrupt embedded cycles of rural poverty and labour migration.

From a capability perspective, education should expand young people's real opportunities to pursue livelihoods they value (Sen, 1999). However, where rural labour markets remain limited and economic development is unevenly distributed across regions, schooling does not

automatically generate secure employment. Instead, education can be associated with migration to urban centres in search of work, reinforcing patterns of regional inequality rather than alleviating them. As Tikly (2016) argues, education reform must be aligned with broader socio-economic transformation if it is to meaningfully contribute to social justice.

For young people in the Atlas Mountains, this suggests that education policy cannot operate in isolation from rural development strategies. As Mcgrath (2010) argues, education and skills systems must be aligned to broader economic transformation if they are to contribute meaningfully to social and economic development. A structurally integrated approach would therefore link secondary education and skills development to regional economic planning, supporting sustainable livelihoods within rural communities. In this sense, the realisation of children's educational rights depends not only on schooling itself, but also on the socio-economic conditions that determine whether education translates into expanded life chances (Sen, 1999).

While a structurally integrated approach offers a compelling framework for addressing rural educational inequality, it is important to recognise the practical constraints shaping the implementation of policy. Morocco operates within fiscal limitations and competing development priorities that affect the pace and scale of reform (World Bank, 2019).

Moreover, global development partnerships can create pressures to prioritise short-term measurable outcomes over long-term structural transformation (Tikly, 2016). As Unterhalter (2009) notes, transforming gendered inequalities requires sustained social and institutional change that extends beyond education alone. Similarly, capability expansion as defined by Sen (1999), depends on broader socio-economic freedoms that education policy cannot achieve in isolation.

These constraints do not invalidate the need for reform, rather they highlight the complexity of realising substantive educational rights in practice. As UNESCO (2020) emphasises, achieving inclusive and equitable education requires sustained institutional capacity, effective governance and long-term investment beyond policy declaration. Achieving meaningful change in rural Morocco therefore depends upon sustained political commitment, cross sector coordination, and community engagement alongside formal policy initiatives. Tikly (2016) similarly argues that education reform must be embedded within broader systems of governance and socio-economic transformation if it is to address structural inequality. Recognising these implementation challenges strengthens, rather than weakens, the argument for structural reform by

situating educational justice within the practical realities of capacity and development constraints (Unterhalter, 2009).

This essay has argued that educational exclusion in rural Morocco, particularly within the Atlas Mountain Regions, cannot be understood as the result of individual choice or cultural preference, but must instead be situated within broader structural inequalities shaped by poverty, gendered labour expectations, regional marginalisation and global development dynamics (UNESCO, 2020). Although Morocco has made measurable progress in expanding primary enrolment and aligned its reform agenda with Sustainable Development Goal 4 in mind (United Nations, 2015), national participation statistics show persistent disparities in retention, progression and educational experiences between urban and rural communities (World Bank, 2019).

The analysis has demonstrated that rural poverty and labour migration constrain children's educational participation not through a lack of aspirations but through restricted capabilities and limited economic security. Sen's (1999) capability approach highlights the importance of expanding substantive freedoms, while Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social reproduction illustrates how unequal access to economic and cultural capital continues to shape educational pathways. These perspectives reveal that access to schooling alone is insufficient to disrupt entrenched disadvantage. Gender further compounds these inequalities, as domestic labour expectations and safety concerns restricting girls' educational progress, reinforcing patterns of generational inequality (Kabeer, 2005).

Policy initiatives such as the Strategic Vision for Education Reform and the Tayssir conditional cash transfer programme reflect genuine state commitment to expanding access (Ministry of National Education, 2015). However, as international research cautions, access focused reforms often prioritise measurable outcomes over structural transformation (Tikly, 2016).

Ultimately, achieving educational justice in rural Morocco requires integrating schooling with broader rural development strategies that address economic vulnerability, gender inequality, and regional disparities simultaneously (Lewin, 2007). Education must therefore be positioned not merely as participation based, but as part of a transformative agenda that expands children's capabilities and long-term life chances. Without such structural alignment, improvements in participation may coexist with continued exclusion in practice (McGrath, 2010). A genuinely equitable education for children in the Atlas Mountains depends not only on policy

reform, but on sustained commitment to substantive equality, contextual responsiveness, and the holistic realisation of children's rights.

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