



Girls' Academic Advantage and the Moroccan Educational Paradox

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Abstract: Recent Moroccan Baccalaureate results have revealed a persistent pattern of female academic advantage, with girls consistently outperforming boys across key indicators of educational achievement. This article examines the factors underlying this trend and explores its broader implications for educational equity and social mobility in Morocco. Drawing on a critical review of the literature and secondary analysis of official educational and labor-market data, the study situates the Moroccan case within global and regional patterns of gendered educational achievement. The analysis suggests that girls' superior performance is associated with educational aspirations, self-regulation, family socialization, and school cultures that increasingly reward behaviors aligned with academic success, while some boys experience disengagement shaped by dominant constructions of masculinity and peer-group dynamics. Building on broader discussions of the disconnect between women's educational attainment and labor-market outcomes in the Middle East and North Africa, the article examines how this tension manifests itself in Morocco through what is termed the *Moroccan Educational Paradox*. It argues that Moroccan girls have accumulated educational capital more rapidly than Moroccan institutions have adapted to convert that capital into equivalent socioeconomic opportunities, highlighting the persistent gap between educational achievement and broader patterns of economic participation and social inclusion.

Keywords: *Moroccan Baccalaureate; gender achievement gap; academic achievement; Moroccan Educational Paradox; educational sociology; cultural capital; social mobility; Morocco.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Rationale

Each year, the announcement of Morocco's Baccalaureate examination results attracts widespread public attention, not only because the examination determines access to higher education and prestigious professional pathways, but also because it provides an important indicator of the performance of the national education system. Among the most striking features of recent Baccalaureate results is the persistent academic advantage of girls, who consistently outperform boys in pass rates, distinctions, and the attainment of the highest national scores. Far from constituting a simple statistical curiosity, this recurring pattern raises important questions about the changing relationship between gender, schooling, and social inequality in contemporary Morocco.

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Historically, educational policy in Morocco, as in many developing countries, focused primarily on expanding girls' access to schooling and reducing gender disparities in enrolment, particularly among students in rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Considerable progress has since been achieved. Gender gaps in access have narrowed substantially, female participation in secondary and higher education has increased markedly, and educational reforms have contributed to improving girls' opportunities to remain in school. As inequalities in access have gradually diminished, however, a different educational landscape has emerged. Girls are no longer merely catching up with boys; they are increasingly surpassing them across multiple indicators of academic achievement.

This transformation reflects a broader international trend. Over the past three decades, research conducted across Europe, North America, Asia, and parts of Africa has documented what many scholars describe as the *reversal of the gender gap* in education, whereby girls increasingly outperform boys in secondary and post-secondary education, particularly in reading literacy, school completion, and academic attainment. Yet although this phenomenon has generated considerable international interest, comparatively little research has examined it within the Moroccan context through an integrated sociological lens that connects educational achievement to broader patterns of social and economic inequality. Existing discussions have largely remained descriptive, emphasizing examination results rather than the structural mechanisms that produce them or the contradictions they reveal beyond schooling.

Public discussion of Moroccan Baccalaureate results often attributes girls' success to greater diligence or boys' weaker performance to declining motivation. Such explanations, however, overlook the complex interaction of educational aspirations, family socialization, school culture, peer-group dynamics, gender identities, and socioeconomic inequalities that shape educational outcomes. Consequently, understanding the female academic advantage requires moving beyond simplistic comparisons of examination scores toward a broader analysis of the social and institutional conditions that influence educational success.

The Moroccan case is particularly compelling because the educational transformation it reveals is accompanied by a striking contradiction beyond the school system. Although girls increasingly outperform boys throughout secondary education, Moroccan women continue to encounter significant barriers to employment, leadership, and economic participation. Educational success and social opportunity therefore do not appear to advance at the same pace.

Although the coexistence of women's educational advancement and limited labor-market participation has been widely discussed in the MENA literature as the MENA Paradox (e.g., World Bank, 2013; Assaad et al., 2020), this article conceptualizes this contradiction as the **Moroccan Educational Paradox**: the coexistence of growing female educational achievement with persistent gender inequalities in the wider social and economic sphere.

The present work sets to examine how this broader regional phenomenon manifests itself through Moroccan Baccalaureate achievement and to interpret it using an educational-sociological framework centered on cultural capital, gender socialization, and institutional practice. Rather than representing an anomaly, this paradox raises fundamental questions concerning the relationship between education, meritocracy, and social mobility in contemporary Morocco.

1.2. Purpose and Significance of the Study

This article advances two central arguments. First, the gender gap observed in Moroccan Baccalaureate achievement should not be interpreted as evidence of inherent female academic

superiority or male intellectual decline. Rather, it reflects the interaction of changing educational aspirations, family socialization, school cultures, gender identities, and broader socioeconomic structures that have increasingly favored girls' educational engagement while contributing to the relative disengagement of some boys. Second, the Moroccan case reveals a broader educational paradox in which girls' growing academic success has not been matched by equivalent gains in women's socioeconomic participation, demonstrating that educational achievement alone is insufficient to guarantee broader social equality.

Drawing on international and Moroccan scholarship, the article examines the principal factors associated with girls' academic advantage—including educational aspirations, self-regulated learning, family socialization, teacher expectations, and school engagement—alongside explanations for boys' relative underachievement, particularly changing constructions of masculinity, peer-group cultures, and alternative pathways to status and social recognition. It argues that the persistent female advantage in educational achievement cannot be understood independently of the structural barriers that continue to shape women's opportunities beyond schooling. In doing so, the article introduces the concept of the Moroccan Educational Paradox as a framework for understanding the growing disconnect between educational success and socioeconomic inclusion.

The article proceeds by reviewing international scholarship on the reversal of the gender gap before examining the Moroccan case through official Baccalaureate statistics. It then analyses the principal factors associated with girls' academic advantage and boys' relative underachievement, develops the concept of the Moroccan Educational Paradox, and concludes by discussing implications for educational policy, practice, and future research.

1.3. Methodological Approach

This article adopts a qualitative, conceptual, and policy-analytical approach. Rather than generating primary empirical data, it synthesizes existing scholarship, official statistics, and policy reports produced by Moroccan and international institutions, combining critical literature review with secondary analysis of publicly available educational and labour-market data. The analysis is informed by cultural reproduction theory, gender socialization perspectives, theories of masculinity, and institutional approaches to schooling, which together provide the conceptual framework for interpreting recent Moroccan developments within broader international debates concerning the reversal of the gender gap.

Official statistics are employed descriptively to identify longitudinal patterns rather than to establish causal relationships, while the accompanying literature is interpreted through a sociological framework informed by cultural reproduction, gender socialization, and theories of masculinity. The objective is not to quantify causal effects but to develop a theoretically informed interpretation of gendered educational achievement and to explain the emergence of the Moroccan Educational Paradox. Consequently, the longitudinal analysis is necessarily constrained by variations in official reporting practices, a limitation that should be considered when interpreting changes over time.

The study covers the period **2014–2023** because official reporting of gender-disaggregated Baccalaureate pass rates has varied considerably across years. Rather than relying on inconsistent secondary media reports, the analysis is restricted to officially published national statistics. Where comparable gender-disaggregated data were not publicly released, the study explicitly indicates their absence instead of reconstructing or estimating missing values. This approach prioritizes methodological transparency, source reliability, and the integrity of longitudinal comparisons.

Against this background, the following sections examine how the persistent academic advantage of girls has emerged, why boys have become comparatively less successful within contemporary schooling, and why these educational transformations have not translated into equivalent advances in women's socioeconomic participation.

2. From Female Disadvantage to Female Academic Advantage: A Global Perspective

2.1. Historical Gender Gaps in Education

For much of the twentieth century, discussions of gender and education were dominated by concerns about female disadvantage. Girls across many societies faced barriers including limited school access, restrictive social norms, early marriage, and unequal investment in education, prompting research and policy to focus on expanding enrolment, retention, and achievement for girls. This concern was closely linked to feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s, which challenged the assumption that schools were neutral institutions and documented gender stereotyping in textbooks, differential teacher expectations, and the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership. International development agendas, including Education for All and the Sustainable Development Goals, reinforced gender parity as a central objective, particularly in developing countries where female literacy and attendance lagged behind male rates.

These efforts produced substantial progress: female enrolment increased dramatically from the late twentieth century onward, and gender gaps in access to primary and secondary education narrowed considerably. As access expanded, scholarly attention gradually shifted from girls' access to education toward understanding why girls were increasingly outperforming boys academically, transforming a discourse once centred on female disadvantage into one focused on female academic advantage and male underachievement.

2.2. The Reversal of the Gender Gap

Over the past three decades, evidence from numerous countries has documented this reversal: girls increasingly outperform boys in school grades, examination results, secondary completion rates, and university enrolment. Large-scale international assessments, particularly successive PISA cycles, consistently show girls outperforming boys in reading literacy across virtually all participating education systems. Likewise, although gender differences in mathematics and science are smaller and more variable, female students frequently achieve equal or superior overall outcomes. The trend is not confined to Western societies; similar patterns have been documented across Europe, North America, Australia, East Asia, Latin America, and parts of Africa, suggesting that broader structural factors are at work.

Several explanations have been proposed. Some researchers argue that contemporary educational systems increasingly reward behaviours traditionally associated with female socialization—organization, attentiveness, cooperation, and sustained effort—while others point to changes in labour markets and social expectations that have strengthened girls' educational aspirations. Concurrently, boys are more likely to experience disciplinary problems, absenteeism, and dropout, raising concerns about schools' capacity to sustain male engagement. Importantly, researchers caution against reading the reversal as evidence that educational inequality has disappeared: outcomes remain shaped by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geography, and female educational success does not necessarily translate into equality in employment, income, or political representation.

2.3. Theoretical Perspectives on Gendered Educational Achievement

The emergence of female academic advantage has stimulated considerable theoretical debate concerning the social mechanisms underlying gendered educational achievement. Contemporary scholarship increasingly rejects biological explanations in favour of sociological and educational perspectives emphasizing socialization, institutional structures, gender identity, and individual agency. Five contributions are particularly influential.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) theory of cultural reproduction holds that schools are not neutral institutions that simply reward merit but institutions that value particular forms of cultural capital and disposition. His concept of *habitus*—the durable dispositions acquired through socialization that shape perception, aspiration, and behaviour—suggests that girls' growing academic advantage may partly reflect an alignment between socialization commonly associated with femininity (organization, attentiveness, self-discipline) and the behavioural norms rewarded in contemporary schooling. Carol Gilligan (1982) similarly argued that girls often develop relational orientations characterized by responsibility and attentiveness to others, orientations that—while avoiding essentialist interpretations of gender—may facilitate classroom participation and academic engagement.

Where Bourdieu and Gilligan illuminate female success, Raewyn Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity and Michael Kimmel's (2008) work on peer culture help explain boys' difficulties. Connell argues that dominant, socially constructed forms of masculinity emphasize independence, competitiveness, and resistance to authority, potentially placing academic diligence and compliance in tension with dominant masculine identities. Kimmel extends this by emphasizing peer-group pressures that discourage overt academic commitment in favour of risk-taking and anti-intellectualism, framing male underachievement as a socially situated phenomenon rather than a matter of individual motivation or ability.

Deborah Youdell (2006) adds an institutional dimension, arguing that gender is not simply brought into schools by students but is actively constructed through classroom interaction, disciplinary practice, and everyday institutional routines; schools thus participate in producing, rather than merely evaluating, gendered identities. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that gendered achievement emerges from the interaction of cultural capital, socialization, identity formation, and institutional practice rather than from innate biological difference.

These theoretical perspectives receive consistent empirical support from major international organizations. UNESCO (2023) documents progress in reducing gender disparities in access alongside emerging inequalities in achievement, while successive OECD PISA cycles (OECD, 2016, 2019, 2023) show girls outperforming boys in reading literacy across most participating countries and reporting stronger aspirations and self-regulation. Both organizations caution, however, against equating female educational advantage with the achievement of full gender equality, since educational success does not automatically translate into equal opportunity in employment or leadership—a caveat directly relevant to the Moroccan case examined below.

2.4. Gender and Educational Achievement in Arab and North African Contexts

The growing female advantage in educational achievement is by no means confined to Western education systems. Over the past two decades, similar trends have emerged across the Arab region and North Africa, where female students increasingly outperform male counterparts in attainment, completion, and examination performance—a particularly notable development given the historical

barriers girls faced in accessing education throughout the region. As access expanded following the educational investments of the 1990s onward, women came to constitute the majority of students in higher education across several countries, with research from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and a number of Gulf states reporting that girls achieve higher grades, lower dropout rates, and stronger examination results than boys.

Explanations parallel those advanced for the global trend, with particular emphasis on education's heightened significance as a mechanism of social mobility for women in societies where other economic and professional opportunities remain comparatively constrained. Girls in the region also report stronger commitment to academic work and school engagement, paralleling international research on self-regulated learning, while boys' disengagement has been attributed to changing constructions of masculinity and to labour-market structures that draw some young men into employment before completing their education.

This disconnect has been recognized in the regional literature as the MENA paradox, whereby women's educational attainment has risen substantially while their labour-force participation has remained comparatively low (World Bank, 2013; Assaad et al., 2020). Although originally developed within labour economics and development studies, the concept highlights a broader inconsistency between educational progress and socioeconomic inclusion that extends across much of the Middle East and North Africa.

Crucially, however, this advantage has not been accompanied by gender equality more broadly. A persistent paradox characterizes many Arab and North African societies: women outperform men educationally while continuing to face substantial disadvantages in employment, income, leadership, and political participation, as institutions such as labor markets, family structures, and political systems evolve more slowly than schools. The Moroccan case reflects these regional dynamics closely. Building on the broader literature on the MENA paradox, this article conceptualizes the Moroccan Educational Paradox as the country-specific manifestation of this regional phenomenon, examined through an educational-sociological perspective that links academic achievement to the conversion of educational capital into socioeconomic opportunity. This tension provides the immediate context for the analysis developed in the following sections.

Taken together, the international literature suggests that the growing academic advantage of girls represents a broad structural transformation rather than a phenomenon unique to any single educational system. At the same time, the persistence of gender inequalities beyond schooling demonstrates that educational success alone cannot explain wider patterns of social opportunity. Against this international backdrop, the Moroccan case offers a particularly instructive example of how female academic advancement may coexist with enduring socioeconomic disparities.

3. The Moroccan Case

3.1. Educational Reform and Gender Equity in Morocco

The evolution of gendered patterns of educational achievement in Morocco cannot be understood independently of the reforms that have reshaped the national education system over the past three decades. Since the late 1990s, successive reform initiatives—including the National Charter for Education and Training (1999–2009), the Emergency Plan (2009–2012), and the Strategic Vision for Reform 2015–2030—have sought to expand access to education, improve educational quality, and reduce social and regional inequalities, with gender equity remaining a central policy objective throughout.

These reforms were accompanied by targeted measures designed to increase girls' participation in education, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities. School transportation programs, boarding facilities for rural girls, conditional financial assistance for economically vulnerable families, and national awareness campaigns all sought to reduce barriers associated with poverty, geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and restrictive sociocultural attitudes that had historically limited girls' educational opportunities.

The cumulative impact of these initiatives has been substantial. Female enrolment has increased significantly across all educational levels, while gender disparities in primary and lower-secondary education have narrowed considerably. More broadly, educational attainment has become increasingly associated with social mobility and economic security, encouraging many Moroccan families to view investment in daughters' education not merely as a matter of social justice but as a strategic response to changing economic and societal conditions.

Paradoxically, the success of policies originally intended to achieve gender parity has coincided with the emergence of a new educational reality. Rather than simply eliminating historical inequalities in access, the Moroccan education system now exhibits a persistent pattern of female academic advantage. This transformation is most clearly illustrated through performance in the national Baccalaureate examination.

3.2. Evidence of Female Academic Advantage

The Moroccan Baccalaureate occupies a unique position within the national educational system. As the principal gateway to higher education and many prestigious professional pathways, it constitutes one of the most consequential examinations in students' academic careers and provides a valuable indicator of educational achievement. Official Ministry statistics reveal a consistent pattern of girls outperforming boys whenever gender-disaggregated national pass rates have been published.

Table 1. National Baccalaureate Regular Session Pass Rates by Gender (2014–2023)

Year	Female Pass Rate	Male Pass Rate	Gender Gap
2014	43.06%	36.25%	+6.81%
2015	49.79%	41.23%	+8.56%
2016	48.69%	39.69%	+9.00%
2017	<i>Not officially reported*</i>	<i>Not officially reported*</i>	————
2018	<i>Not officially reported*</i>	<i>Not officially reported*</i>	————
2019	<i>Not officially reported*</i>	<i>Not officially reported*</i>	————
2020	<i>Not officially reported*</i>	<i>Not officially reported*</i>	————
2021	<i>Not officially reported*</i>	<i>Not officially reported*</i>	————
2022	70.87%	61.01%	+9.86%
2023	63.83%	54.89%	+8.94%

**Note.* Gender-disaggregated pass rates are reported only for years in which the Ministry of National Education explicitly published separate national pass rates for female and male candidates. Comparable national gender-disaggregated rates were not officially released for 2017–2021. These years are therefore identified as “Not officially reported” rather than reconstructed from secondary media sources or proportional-share statistics, thereby preserving methodological consistency and ensuring the reliability of longitudinal comparisons. Source: Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training (2014, 2015, 2016); Ministry of National Education (2019, 2020); Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education and Scientific Research (2021); Ministry of National Education, Preschool and Sports (2022, 2023).

Despite variations in the Ministry's reporting practices, the available official evidence reveals a remarkably stable pattern. Whenever comparable national pass rates have been published, girls have consistently outperformed boys by margins ranging from approximately seven to ten percentage points. Although comparable statistics were unavailable for the intervening years, Ministry communiqués continued to highlight female students among the highest-performing candidates nationally and regionally, while the reintroduction of gender-disaggregated statistics in 2022 and

2023 confirmed the persistence of the gender gap in favor of girls. Taken together, these findings suggest that female academic success represents a durable structural trend rather than an isolated annual fluctuation.

The academic predominance of female students extends beyond overall pass rates to indicators of educational excellence. Official Baccalaureate communiqués consistently report that girls are disproportionately represented among candidates obtaining honors (*mentions*) and frequently occupy the highest positions among regional and national achievers. The gender gap therefore encompasses not only examination success but also higher levels of academic distinction.

At the same time, national statistics should not obscure important inequalities within the female student population itself. Educational opportunities remain unevenly distributed across urban and rural areas, socioeconomic groups, and regions. In many rural communities, structural barriers—including geographical isolation, transportation difficulties, and economic hardship—continue to limit girls' progression to upper-secondary education. Consequently, the female advantage reflected in national Baccalaureate results is most evident among students who have successfully navigated these constraints and remained within the educational system until the completion of secondary schooling. Gender therefore intersects with geography and socioeconomic status, reminding us that not all girls benefit equally from educational expansion.

The Baccalaureate results also correspond with broader educational indicators. Girls generally exhibit lower dropout rates, stronger educational persistence, and greater continuity throughout secondary education than boys, suggesting that their stronger performance in the Baccalaureate reflects a broader pattern of sustained engagement with schooling rather than an isolated examination outcome.

These findings should not be interpreted as evidence of inherent differences in intellectual ability between girls and boys. Rather, they point to the interaction of educational aspirations, study habits, family socialization, school experiences, institutional expectations, and broader social conditions. The persistence of girls' stronger academic performance therefore calls for a sociological rather than a biological explanation—a task undertaken in the following sections through an examination of educational aspirations, school culture, gender socialization, and the construction of masculine and feminine identities.

3.3. The Emerging Moroccan Educational Paradox

While the growing academic advantage of girls represents a significant educational achievement, it also raises a broader sociological question. If female students consistently outperform their male counterparts in school, why do Moroccan women continue to experience lower levels of labor-market participation, limited representation in leadership positions, and persistent inequalities in economic opportunity?

The broader disconnect between women's educational attainment and labor-market participation has previously been identified in the regional literature as the *MENA paradox* (World Bank, 2013; Assaad et al., 2020). Building on this literature, the present article uses the term *Moroccan Educational Paradox* to refer specifically to the Moroccan manifestation of this regional phenomenon. Rather than approaching it primarily from the perspective of labor economics, the analysis adopts an educational-sociological lens that examines how educational achievement, as reflected in Baccalaureate performance, is—or is not—converted into broader socioeconomic opportunity.

On the one hand, girls increasingly demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement, stronger educational engagement, and greater success in high-stakes examinations such as the Baccalaureate. On the other hand, these educational gains do not appear to translate into equivalent advantages in employment, professional advancement, or socioeconomic participation. Educational success and social empowerment therefore do not necessarily progress at the same pace.

The paradox reflects a broader tension between educational modernization and societal transformation. Although Morocco has made substantial progress in expanding educational opportunities and promoting female academic achievement, change within labor-market institutions and broader gender relations has been comparatively slower and more uneven. Consequently, educational credentials alone cannot fully account for gender equality, as their value ultimately depends on the wider social, economic, and institutional contexts in which they are converted into opportunities.

The Moroccan Educational Paradox provides the conceptual foundation for the analysis developed later in this article. Section 6 returns to this issue by examining the extent to which women's growing educational capital has translated into economic participation, professional mobility, and broader social empowerment.

4. Why Are Girls Outperforming Boys?

The persistence of female academic advantage in Morocco cannot be attributed to a single cause. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of individual dispositions, family socialization, institutional practices, and broader societal transformations. As the international literature reviewed earlier suggests, girls' superior educational performance is best understood not as evidence of innate cognitive differences but as the cumulative outcome of educational aspirations, self-regulated learning, family expectations, and school environments that increasingly reward behaviors associated with academic success. These factors reinforce one another throughout students' educational trajectories, creating conditions that favor sustained engagement with schooling.

4.1. Educational Aspirations and Social Mobility

One important explanation concerns the changing relationship between education and social mobility. In contemporary Morocco, educational attainment has become an increasingly important route to employment, economic security, and social recognition. For many girls, academic success represents not only a means of obtaining qualifications but also a pathway toward greater autonomy and future opportunity. From a Bourdieusian perspective, education constitutes a form of *institutionalized cultural capital* whose value depends upon long-term investment in schooling. Girls who perceive education as an essential resource for upward mobility are therefore more likely to demonstrate sustained commitment to academic work and to aspire to higher education.

By contrast, some boys may perceive alternative routes to social status and economic participation—including early employment, entrepreneurship, migration, or participation in the informal economy—as more immediate or attainable than prolonged educational investment. Such perceptions may reduce the motivational value attached to schooling for some male students, contributing to differences in educational engagement rather than reflecting differences in academic ability.

4.2. Self-Regulation, Academic Discipline, and Study Habits

A second explanation lies in differences in learning behavior. Educational research consistently identifies self-regulated learning as one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement. Successful learners establish goals, organize their study time, monitor their progress, and adapt their learning strategies to changing academic demands. Numerous studies suggest that girls, on average, display these behaviors more consistently than boys, demonstrating stronger organizational skills, greater persistence, and more regular study routines.

These characteristics are particularly advantageous in preparing for the Moroccan Baccalaureate, which requires sustained effort across multiple disciplines over an extended period. Girls also tend to exhibit lower levels of absenteeism and fewer behavioral infractions, increasing their cumulative exposure to instruction. The female advantage observed in Baccalaureate performance therefore appears to reflect differences in educational engagement and learning management rather than differences in intellectual capacity.

4.3. Family Socialization and Parental Expectations

Family environments play a central role in shaping students' educational aspirations and attitudes toward learning. Through expectations, encouragement, supervision, and resource allocation, parents influence both students' motivation and their long-term commitment to education. Although Moroccan families historically invested more heavily in boys' education, changing social and economic conditions have increasingly strengthened investment in daughters' schooling, as education is now widely perceived as an important means of improving women's future opportunities.

These changing expectations contribute to forms of gender socialization that encourage girls to develop responsibility, perseverance, and self-discipline—qualities that schools increasingly reward. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* provides a useful framework for understanding this process, since family environments gradually cultivate dispositions that shape students' orientations toward schooling and achievement. At the same time, parental expectations vary considerably according to socioeconomic status, educational background, and geographical location, reminding us that gender intersects with broader forms of social inequality.

4.4. School Culture and Teacher Expectations

Schools themselves contribute to the production of gendered educational outcomes. Classroom interaction, disciplinary practices, and teacher expectations all influence students' engagement with learning and their academic identities. Research frequently reports that teachers perceive girls as more organized, cooperative, and academically committed, perceptions that often translate into greater encouragement and more positive classroom interactions. Boys, by contrast, are more likely to be associated with disciplinary concerns and behavioral difficulties, experiences that may gradually weaken their attachment to schooling.

Youdell's institutional perspective suggests that schools do not simply measure gender differences but actively participate in producing them through everyday educational practices. Contemporary schooling increasingly rewards attentiveness, organization, perseverance, and sustained academic effort—behaviors that tend to align more closely with patterns of feminine socialization than with dominant constructions of masculinity. Consequently, female academic advantage emerges not from

any single factor but from the cumulative interaction of educational aspiration, self-regulated learning, family socialization, and school culture.

Taken together, these factors explain why girls increasingly succeed within contemporary educational institutions. They do not, however, fully explain why boys have become comparatively less successful. Understanding male underachievement requires examining how masculinity, peer culture, school disengagement, and alternative pathways to status shape boys' educational experiences. It is to these issues that the following section now turns.

5. Understanding Male Underachievement

The growing academic advantage of girls cannot be fully understood without examining boys' educational experiences. International research increasingly suggests that the widening gender gap reflects not only improvements in girls' educational performance but also patterns of male underachievement characterized by weaker school engagement, higher absenteeism, disciplinary difficulties, and lower educational attainment. Morocco appears to reflect many of these broader trends. Importantly, male underachievement should not be interpreted as evidence of lower intellectual ability. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of educational motivation, gender identity, peer culture, and broader socioeconomic conditions that shape how boys perceive schooling and their future opportunities.

5.1. School Disengagement and Academic Motivation

One of the most consistent explanations for male underachievement concerns differences in school engagement. Academic success depends not only on cognitive ability but also on sustained participation in learning. Across many educational systems, boys are more likely than girls to exhibit weaker commitment to school through reduced classroom participation, irregular homework completion, absenteeism, and disciplinary problems.

Within the Moroccan context, this pattern may be reinforced by labor-market perceptions that academic qualifications are not always essential for achieving economic independence. Employment in the informal sector, vocational occupations, entrepreneurship, or migration may appear to offer more immediate opportunities than prolonged educational investment. Repeated academic difficulties can further weaken motivation, creating a cumulative cycle in which disengagement contributes to lower achievement, which in turn reinforces negative attitudes toward schooling.

5.2. Masculinity, Peer Culture, and Academic Identity

Educational engagement is also shaped by the ways masculinity is socially constructed. Connell's (2005) concept of *hegemonic masculinity* emphasizes that dominant masculine norms often value independence, toughness, competitiveness, and resistance to authority. Academic success, however, typically requires perseverance, organization, cooperation, and a willingness to seek assistance—qualities that may be perceived within some peer groups as inconsistent with prevailing ideals of masculinity.

Kimmel (2008) further argues that adolescent peer cultures play a central role in reinforcing these expectations. Boys often negotiate their social status through peer approval, and visible academic commitment may sometimes be interpreted as incompatible with masculine identity. Consequently, some students distance themselves from school not because they lack academic ability but because educational engagement conflicts with the forms of masculinity valued within their social

environments. Male underachievement thus becomes a socially situated process rather than simply an individual educational problem.

5.3. Alternative Pathways to Status and Success

Educational achievement derives much of its motivational power from its perceived relationship to future opportunity. When alternative routes to economic participation or social recognition appear attainable without extended schooling, the perceived value of academic investment may decline.

For some Moroccan boys, employment, entrepreneurship, vocational work, migration, or participation in the informal economy may constitute realistic alternatives to higher education, particularly in a context where graduate unemployment remains a significant concern. Girls, by contrast, often perceive educational qualifications as one of the most reliable pathways to economic independence and social mobility. These differing perceptions help explain why educational aspirations frequently diverge by gender despite comparable academic potential.

5.4. Digital Culture and Contemporary Masculinities

Contemporary digital environments have added a further dimension to boys' educational experiences. Social media platforms and online gaming communities increasingly function as spaces in which masculine identities are performed, negotiated, and validated. From the perspective of Connell's and Kimmel's frameworks, these digital spaces may reinforce values such as competitiveness, risk-taking, and resistance to institutional authority, while simultaneously reducing the social prestige associated with sustained academic effort.

Research has consistently shown (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023) that boys spend more time than girls engaged in competitive online gaming, potentially reducing study time and strengthening peer cultures that privilege immediate gratification over long-term educational goals. Digital culture should therefore not be viewed simply as a source of distraction but as part of the broader social environment within which educational identities are formed. Nevertheless, its influence should not be overstated, since educational outcomes continue to reflect the interaction of family background, school experiences, socioeconomic conditions, and individual motivation.

5.5. Beyond Deficit Narratives

Interpreting these patterns requires considerable caution. Male underachievement should not be understood as evidence that boys constitute a uniformly disadvantaged group, nor should female academic success be viewed as coming at boys' expense. Gender intersects with socioeconomic status, geographical location, family background, and school context, producing substantial variation within both groups. Many boys continue to excel academically, just as many girls continue to encounter significant educational barriers.

The widening gender gap is therefore best understood as reflecting broader transformations in educational aspiration, gender socialization, and changing perceptions of opportunity rather than a simple reversal of historical inequalities. Understanding these dynamics also requires looking beyond schools themselves. If girls increasingly accumulate educational capital while women continue to encounter structural barriers in employment and public life, then educational achievement alone cannot explain broader patterns of gender inequality. It is precisely this disconnect that gives rise to what this article terms the Moroccan Educational Paradox, examined in the following section.

6. The Moroccan Educational Paradox

The preceding sections have shown that girls consistently outperform boys throughout Moroccan secondary education. Yet these educational gains are not matched by equivalent gains in women's economic and professional lives. This disconnect between educational success and broader social opportunity constitutes what is termed here the Moroccan Educational Paradox. Rather than reflecting a failure of educational reform, the paradox illustrates the unequal pace at which educational institutions and wider social structures have evolved. While schools have become increasingly effective in supporting girls' educational achievement, labor markets, organizational structures, and gender norms have changed more gradually. Understanding this paradox therefore requires moving beyond the educational sphere to examine how academic qualifications are translated—or fail to be translated—into broader forms of social and economic opportunity.

Although similar tensions between women's educational attainment and labor-market participation have been documented in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the present analysis examines how this broader pattern manifests itself within the Moroccan educational system through the lens of Baccalaureate achievement and educational sociology.

6.1. The Paradox in Numbers

The Moroccan Educational Paradox becomes particularly visible when educational outcomes are considered alongside labor-market indicators. Although girls consistently outperform boys in the Baccalaureate examination, women remain substantially disadvantaged in employment and professional advancement. Table 2 summarizes this contrast using the latest official indicators available during the period under study.

Table 2. The Moroccan Educational Paradox in Numbers (Latest Available Indicators up to 2023)

Indicator	Women	Men	Gender Gap / Ratio
Baccalaureate Pass Rate (2023)	63.83%	54.89%	+8.94% (Female Advantage)
Labour-Force Participation Rate	≈19.8%	≈70.4%	−50.6 percentage points
Graduate Unemployment Rate	≈26.8%	≈15.8%	+11.0 percentage points (Female disadvantage)
Share of Managerial Positions	≈13%	≈87%	Approximately 1:7 ratio

Note. Compiled from the Ministry of National Education, Preschool and Sports (2023), Haut-Commissariat au Plan [HCP] (2023), and the World Bank (2023).

The figures presented in Table 2 reveal a striking sociological contradiction. Although female students outperform their male counterparts in the Baccalaureate by almost nine percentage points, Moroccan women participate in the labor market at less than one-third the rate of men. Rather than diminishing with higher educational attainment, this disparity becomes even more pronounced among university graduates, where women experience substantially higher unemployment despite stronger academic credentials.

The imbalance extends beyond access to employment. Women also remain markedly underrepresented in managerial and leadership positions, indicating that barriers persist throughout professional advancement rather than solely at labor-market entry. Educational success therefore does not automatically generate equivalent economic, professional, or institutional opportunities. The central question is no longer why girls succeed academically, but why these educational gains are only partially converted into broader forms of social mobility. It is precisely this disconnect between educational achievement and socioeconomic opportunity that constitutes the Moroccan Educational Paradox.

6.2. Education and the Limits of Meritocracy

Modern educational systems are commonly founded upon the principle of meritocracy, according to which academic achievement should provide individuals with opportunities for employment, upward mobility, and social recognition. From this perspective, educational qualifications are expected to function as reliable mechanisms through which talent and effort are rewarded. The Moroccan case, however, complicates this assumption. Although female students consistently outperform their male counterparts academically, these advantages do not translate into equivalent outcomes in employment, career advancement, or economic participation.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital provides a useful framework for understanding this discrepancy. Educational qualifications constitute a form of *institutionalized cultural capital* whose social value depends upon its successful conversion into other forms of capital, particularly economic, social, and symbolic capital. This process of conversion is neither automatic nor neutral. Rather, it is conditioned by the institutional structures within which educational credentials acquire value.

Viewed through this lens, the Moroccan Educational Paradox reflects a disruption in the conversion of cultural capital into economic and institutional capital. Educational institutions increasingly recognize and reward female academic excellence, yet labor-market structures and organizational practices do not consistently reward that excellence to the same extent. This imbalance reflects a broader phenomenon of institutional inertia, whereby educational reform has progressed more rapidly than changes in labor-market structures, workplace practices, and broader gender relations. Consequently, educational achievement creates opportunities whose realization remains contingent upon factors operating beyond the educational system itself.

The Moroccan case therefore invites a more critical understanding of meritocracy. Academic success undoubtedly expands individual opportunities, but educational credentials alone cannot overcome structural inequalities that continue to shape access to employment, professional advancement, and positions of influence.

6.3. Gender Norms Beyond School

Educational institutions do not operate independently of the societies within which they are embedded. Rather, they interact continuously with family structures, labor markets, cultural expectations, and political institutions that shape how educational qualifications are ultimately valued. Consequently, although girls increasingly succeed within schools, they often continue to encounter structural constraints after graduation that limit the extent to which educational achievement translates into broader socioeconomic advancement.

Family expectations remain one important factor. Despite significant social change, women frequently continue to assume disproportionate responsibility for domestic work and caregiving, responsibilities that may influence career choices, labor-force participation, and opportunities for professional advancement. At the same time, labor markets continue to exhibit forms of occupational segregation and unequal representation in positions of authority that restrict women's progression even when educational qualifications are comparable or superior to those of men.

Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity provides additional insight into these dynamics. Professional environments, leadership structures, and organizational cultures frequently continue to reflect historically masculine norms that advantage men in recruitment, promotion, and access to influential professional networks. Gender inequality is therefore reproduced not only

through educational institutions but also through workplaces, families, and broader social arrangements that continue to shape opportunities long after formal education has been completed.

Taken together, these patterns reveal an important limitation of linear models of social progress, which assume that educational advancement inevitably produces broader social equality. The Moroccan experience instead suggests that educational modernization and social transformation do not necessarily proceed at the same pace. Schools have become increasingly effective in promoting female educational achievement, while labor markets, organizational structures, and prevailing gender norms have adapted more gradually. Educational progress has therefore outpaced institutional change.

The Moroccan Educational Paradox consequently demonstrates that educational reform, although indispensable, is not sufficient by itself to produce gender equality. Moroccan girls have accumulated educational capital more rapidly than Moroccan institutions have adapted to convert that capital into equivalent socioeconomic opportunities. Understanding contemporary gender dynamics in Morocco therefore requires analyzing not only educational achievement but also the institutional conditions under which that achievement acquires value beyond the classroom.

7. Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

The findings of this study suggest that Morocco's educational priorities have entered a new phase. Whereas earlier reforms rightly focused on expanding girls' access to schooling and reducing gender disparities in enrolment, contemporary policy must address a more complex set of challenges. Female students now consistently outperform boys in secondary education, yet this educational advantage coexists with persistent male disengagement from schooling and a substantial disconnect between women's educational attainment and their socioeconomic opportunities.

Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond narrow conceptions of educational success based solely on examination performance. Educational policy should instead adopt a more holistic perspective that considers not only achievement within schools but also students' engagement, well-being, transitions into employment, and long-term social inclusion. Importantly, this should not be approached as a zero-sum competition between girls and boys. Rather, the objective is to create an educational system in which both genders can realize their potential while ensuring that educational achievement is translated into meaningful opportunities beyond schooling.

7.1. Supporting Boys' Educational Engagement

The evidence reviewed in this article indicates that boys' lower academic performance is closely associated with declining school engagement, competing constructions of masculinity, peer-group expectations, and alternative perceptions of social success. Policies should therefore focus less on remedial academic intervention and more on strengthening boys' relationship with learning throughout secondary education.

Schools can contribute by identifying students at risk of disengagement at an early stage, promoting mentoring and career-guidance programs, and creating learning environments that encourage participation, responsibility, and academic confidence. At the same time, educational initiatives should challenge cultural narratives that portray academic commitment as incompatible with masculine identity. Supporting boys' engagement is not intended to offset girls' success, but to ensure that educational opportunities remain accessible and meaningful for all learners.

7.2. Sustaining and Consolidating Girls' Educational Success

Although girls now achieve consistently higher academic outcomes than boys, these gains should not be interpreted as evidence that gender equality within education has been fully achieved. Significant disparities remain across rural and urban settings, socioeconomic groups, and regions, and many girls continue to face structural barriers affecting educational progression.

Educational policy should therefore continue investing in measures that improve access, retention, and academic support for disadvantaged female students. Equally important is expanding opportunities beyond school by encouraging girls to pursue a wider range of academic disciplines and professional careers, particularly in science, technology, engineering, leadership, and entrepreneurship. Sustaining girls' educational success requires ensuring that academic excellence is accompanied by broader opportunities for professional development and social participation.

7.3. Challenging Gender Stereotypes and Strengthening School–Family Partnerships

Because educational achievement develops within broader social environments, improving outcomes requires stronger collaboration between schools and families. Parents play an essential role in shaping educational aspirations, reinforcing study habits, and encouraging long-term commitment to learning. Policies that promote effective school–family communication and provide support for parental engagement can strengthen these processes for both girls and boys.

Educational institutions must also continue challenging gender stereotypes that influence students' aspirations, subject choices, and perceptions of academic ability. Teacher education programs should help educators recognize implicit gender biases, while curricula and learning materials should present diverse models of achievement that encourage girls and boys alike to pursue educational and professional pathways free from restrictive social expectations.

7.4. Bridging Educational Achievement and Social Opportunity

The Moroccan Educational Paradox demonstrates that improving educational outcomes alone is insufficient to achieve broader gender equality. Despite accumulating increasing levels of educational capital, many Moroccan women continue to encounter barriers when entering the labor market, progressing professionally, and accessing leadership positions.

Addressing this disconnect requires greater coordination between educational institutions, labor-market policies, employers, and public authorities. Career guidance, internship opportunities, university–industry partnerships, and graduate employability programs should facilitate the transition from education to work. At the same time, broader institutional reforms that promote women's labor-force participation, reduce occupational segregation, and expand leadership opportunities remain essential if educational achievement is to generate its full social and economic returns.

Ultimately, the Moroccan Educational Paradox suggests that educational reform and labor-market reform should no longer be treated as separate policy domains. Rather, educational achievement and socioeconomic opportunity must be understood as complementary dimensions of a single national strategy for inclusive development.

8. Conclusion

The growing academic advantage of girls represents one of the most significant transformations in contemporary Moroccan education. Once preoccupied with expanding girls' access to schooling, educational debate must now confront a markedly different reality in which female students consistently outperform their male counterparts across key indicators of educational achievement. The Moroccan Baccalaureate, as the country's principal secondary-school examination, provides compelling evidence of this long-term shift.

This article has argued that this transformation cannot be explained through biological differences or simplistic narratives of female superiority and male failure. Rather, girls' academic advantage and boys' relative underachievement emerge from the interaction of educational aspirations, family socialization, school culture, gender identity, and broader social structures. These processes shape students' engagement with schooling in different ways, while remaining conditioned by socioeconomic background and geographical context. The observed gender gap is therefore best understood as a socially constructed and institutionally mediated phenomenon rather than an inherent difference in academic ability.

The article's principal contribution is the concept of the Moroccan Educational Paradox. While girls increasingly accumulate educational qualifications and dominate academic achievement, women continue to encounter significant obstacles in converting these educational gains into equivalent opportunities for employment, professional advancement, and leadership. The Moroccan case therefore challenges conventional assumptions that educational success necessarily leads to social mobility or that meritocratic educational systems automatically generate broader gender equality.

Although grounded in Morocco, the implications of this analysis extend beyond the national context. As female academic advantage becomes increasingly visible across many educational systems, the Moroccan experience illustrates that success within schools should not be equated automatically with equality beyond them. Educational policy must therefore pursue complementary objectives: sustaining girls' educational achievement, strengthening boys' engagement with learning, and reducing the institutional barriers that continue to constrain women's participation in economic and public life.

Ultimately, the Moroccan Educational Paradox demonstrates that Moroccan girls have accumulated educational capital more rapidly than Moroccan institutions have adapted to convert that capital into equivalent socioeconomic opportunities. Until this imbalance is addressed, educational excellence alone will remain an incomplete measure of gender equality, and the promise of education as a vehicle for social mobility, inclusion, and national development will remain only partially fulfilled.

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