



Learning Through Critical Advocacy Research:



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A Psychological and Participatory Approach to Women's Empowerment in Rural Morocco



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Introduction

This internship with the High Atlas Foundation has transformed my understanding of research from an abstract academic exercise into a relational, emotionally grounded, and ethically accountable practice. What began as a pre departure learning plan grounded in Critical Advocacy

Research has evolved into lived, on the ground engagement with women in rural Moroccan villages whose lives are shaped by geographic isolation, traditional gender norms, economic dependency, and the long term consequences of a devastating earthquake.

Rather than observing from a distance, I am embedded in the research process through facilitation, translation, advocacy, and emotional presence. This report integrates my original learning plan, developed in Canada in October 2025, with my current field experience in Morocco since January 2026. It documents the psychological research methods I am using, the theories guiding my interpretation, and the findings emerging through participatory community engagement. The work described here demonstrates how qualitative psychological research, when grounded in Critical Advocacy Research, can support community defined empowerment and meaningful social change.

Conceptual Framework: Critical Advocacy Research

Critical Advocacy Research (CAR) rejects the assumption that research can or should be neutral. As outlined in my pre departure learning plan, CAR emphasizes positionality, power, reflexivity, accountability, and transformative intent (Aljohani, 2025). Knowledge production is understood as inseparable from systems of power, and researchers are required to name their social location and ethical responsibilities rather than conceal them behind claims of objectivity.

As a western raised Muslim woman, a Queen Elizabeth Scholar, and a temporary guest in Morocco, I occupy a complex position within this research context. My identity shapes how women perceive me and how I interpret their stories. CAR requires that I remain reflexive about these dynamics rather than attempting to erase them. This framework is

particularly important in women's rights work in Muslim majority contexts, where Western feminist narratives have historically reproduced colonial assumptions about saving women rather than supporting community led change rooted in local realities, faith, and culture.

Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative and Participatory Research Design

The research design used throughout this internship is qualitative, participatory, and grounded in applied psychological inquiry. The primary methods include focus groups, semi structured one on one interviews, participant observation, participatory needs assessment, and collective prioritization through voting. These methods align with qualitative psychological approaches such as narrative inquiry and phenomenology, which emphasize lived experience, meaning making, and contextual understanding rather than generalizability.

In rural village settings where literacy levels are low and oral tradition is central, qualitative methods are not only appropriate but ethically necessary. Written surveys or standardized instruments would exclude many women and reproduce existing inequalities. Instead, research unfolds through dialogue, storytelling, observation, and collective reflection.

Focus Groups in Community Psychology

Focus groups are a well established method in community and health psychology because they allow participants to co construct meaning and validate shared experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In this internship, focus groups serve both research and psychosocial functions. Women collectively discuss needs related to infrastructure, education,

transportation, income generation, and spiritual knowledge, while also sharing emotional experiences linked to the earthquake and long standing marginalization.

From a psychological perspective, focus groups create a sense of belonging and communal coping. Hearing others articulate similar struggles reduces isolation and supports emotional normalization. These group dynamics provide insight into shared trauma narratives, collective resilience, and emerging empowerment.

Semi Structured One on One Interviews

Semi structured interviews are widely used in psychological research because they balance consistency with flexibility (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Interviews conducted during this internship follow guiding themes such as access to resources, changes in self perception, barriers to participation, and experiences within cooperatives, while allowing women to lead the conversation. This approach respects cultural norms around storytelling and avoids imposing rigid questioning structures that may feel intrusive or hierarchical.

Participant Observation

Participant observation involves working alongside women in cooperatives, attending community meetings, traveling to villages, and observing interactions over time. This method allows psychological processes such as confidence building, resistance, negotiation, and relational change to be observed as they unfold rather than inferred retrospectively. Participant observation also supports reflexivity, as my own emotional responses become data that signal moments of tension, transformation, and ethical complexity.

Needs Assessment and Participatory Prioritization

The process of gathering lists of needs and prioritizing them through collective voting reflects principles of community needs assessment commonly used in applied psychology and public health (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). Women identify gaps between current conditions and desired outcomes and then collaboratively select the top three priorities to present to donors. While all needs are documented, prioritization is necessary for advocacy effectiveness.

Psychologically, this process fosters autonomy, agency, and collective efficacy. Rather than being passive recipients of aid, women actively determine what matters most to their lives and communities.

Translation as an Ethical Research Practice

An essential component of my role has been serving as a human translator across Moroccan Arabic, classical Arabic, and English. Translation is not neutral. It requires interpreting emotional nuance, cultural meaning, and unspoken context. Acting as a linguistic bridge places me in a position of power, requiring continuous reflexivity to ensure that women's voices are represented accurately and without distortion. Within Critical Advocacy Research, translation becomes an ethical research practice rather than a technical task.

Psychological Theories Informing the Analysis

Social Identity Theory

Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory explains how group membership shapes self concept, behavior, and power dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the rural villages where I work, women's identities have historically been

confined to domestic roles, while men occupied public and economic spaces. This division reinforced group based hierarchies that limited women's participation in community life.

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As women began engaging in income generating activities such as weaving, sewing, and producing handmade goods, their social identity shifted. They moved from being perceived solely as caregivers to contributors. This change initially triggered resistance from men, as it challenged established norms. Over time, economic contribution facilitated renegotiation of gender roles, illustrating how shifts in group identity can alter power relations.

Identity Negotiation Theory

Identity Negotiation Theory emphasizes how individuals navigate belonging and individuality across cultural contexts (Ting Toomey, 2005). The women in these villages are negotiating new identities as economically active community members while remaining rooted in tradition. This negotiation is gradual, relational, and emotionally complex.

I am also engaged in identity negotiation. As a Muslim woman who does not wear hijab and was raised in Canada, I share faith and linguistic roots with the community while also being perceived as an outsider. Awareness of identity negotiation allows me to approach moments of tension with humility, empathy, and cultural sensitivity rather than defensiveness.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment Theory, central to community psychology, conceptualizes empowerment as a process through which individuals and groups gain control over their lives, access resources, and participate meaningfully in decision making (Zimmerman, 1995). The cooperative initiatives observed during this internship reflect empowerment at individual, relational, and community levels. Women report increased confidence, skill development, and belief in their capacity to contribute economically and socially.

Self Efficacy Theory

Albert Bandura's Self Efficacy Theory highlights the role of belief in one's capabilities in motivating behavior and persistence (Bandura, 1977). Many women initially expressed doubt about their ability to work, speak publicly, or generate income. Through mastery experiences, social modeling, and collective success, their self efficacy increased. Observing peers succeed reduced fear and normalized participation, reinforcing both individual and collective confidence.

Trauma Informed and Resilience Based Perspectives

Although this internship is not a clinical intervention, trauma informed principles are essential in a post earthquake context. Trauma informed approaches emphasize safety, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment (SAMHSA, 2014). Many women experienced material loss, psychological distress, and a profound sense of abandonment following the earthquake.

From a resilience based perspective, the women's engagement in cooperatives, advocacy, and skill building reflects adaptive coping rather

than pathology. Their resilience emerges through relationships, purpose, and community support rather than individual endurance alone.

Key Findings from Fieldwork

Across villages, women consistently identified structural barriers including lack of roads, limited transportation, interrupted education, non literacy, and economic dependency. Most women stopped attending school after grade six, and many have never traveled beyond a small geographic radius. These structural constraints contribute to psychological outcomes such as reduced self efficacy, social isolation, and learned helplessness.

Spiritual knowledge gaps also emerged, with some women expressing uncertainty about religious practices. Addressing these gaps became part of a holistic empowerment approach integrating psychological, financial, and spiritual well being.

Since participating in cooperative work and skills training, women reported increased confidence, hope, and a renewed sense of purpose. Many expressed deep emotional relief that support arrived after the earthquake, a moment when they believed they had been forgotten. From a psychological perspective, perceived social support plays a critical role in trauma recovery and resilience.

Reflexivity and Emotional Labor

This internship requires sustained emotional engagement. Women have directly shared that my presence, advocacy, and translation have given them hope and shifted how they view their future. While Critical Advocacy Research cautions against centering the researcher, it also recognizes emotional responses as meaningful data. My emotional reactions signal

moments of injustice, resilience, and transformation. Reflexivity allows me to hold this emotional labor responsibly rather than suppressing it or allowing it to overshadow community voices.

Conclusion

This internship demonstrates that meaningful research is relational, ethical, and grounded in accountability to communities. Through Critical Advocacy Research, qualitative and participatory methods, psychological theory, and reflexive practice, I am learning how empowerment unfolds from within rather than being imposed from outside.

The women I work with are not passive recipients of aid. They are active agents rebuilding their lives after trauma, negotiating identity, and reshaping community norms. This experience will continue to shape how I approach psychology, advocacy, and research, reinforcing my commitment to culturally grounded, community defined change.

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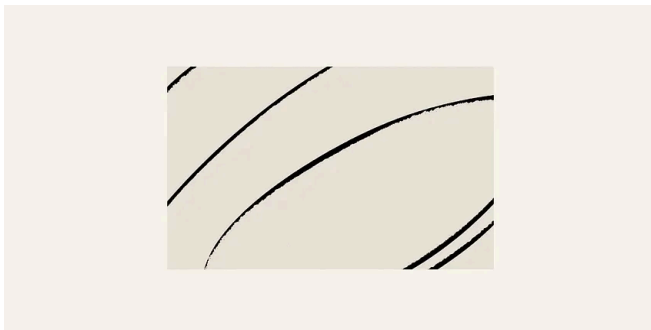




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
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