

Moroccan Women and the Restriction of Freedoms: Between International Obligations and Social Practices A Case Study of a Moroccan Schoolgirl

Dr. Fatima FERHANE*

Independent researcher, Social Court of First Instance in Casablanca, Morocco

Received: 06 / 09 / 2026

Accepted: 11 / 10 / 2026

Published: 21 / 10 / 2026

Abstract: Despite Morocco's commitment to international human rights instruments and its constitutional recognition of equality, women and girls may continue to encounter social and institutional restrictions that affect their personal freedoms and self-expression. This study examines the gap between Morocco's international obligations concerning women's rights and the social practices that may limit the exercise of these rights, with particular attention to the educational environment. It adopts a qualitative case-study approach centred on a Moroccan schoolgirl who experienced exclusion from classroom activities because of her clothing. Information was collected through a semi-structured interview exploring the incident, its psychological and educational effects, the student's relationships with peers, and her subsequent educational choices. The analysis suggests that disciplinary practices related to clothing, when perceived as disproportionate or insensitive to individual differences, may weaken students' sense of belonging, undermine their motivation to attend school, and contribute to negative peer interactions. The case also highlights tensions between institutional regulations, family upbringing, individual expression, and prevailing social expectations. Although the study is based on a single case and cannot establish how widespread these experiences are, it illustrates the importance of examining how legal principles concerning equality and non-discrimination are implemented in everyday educational settings. The study recommends reviewing school regulations, strengthening human rights and gender-equality education, training educational staff in child protection and non-discriminatory practices, and encouraging constructive cooperation among schools, students, and families. It concludes that meaningful protection of women's and girls' freedoms requires not only formal legal commitments but also fair, inclusive, and respectful practices within educational institutions.

Keywords: *Women's Rights, Personal Freedom, Gender Equality, Morocco, International Human Rights Obligations, School Regulations, Educational Exclusion, Social Discrimination, Freedom of Expression, Case Study.*

Cite this article: FERHANE, F. (2026). Moroccan Women and the Restriction of Freedoms: Between International Obligations and Social Practices A Case Study of a Moroccan Schoolgirl. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 3(10), 42-48.

Introduction

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it highlights the contradiction between Morocco's international human rights obligations, particularly those relating to women's rights, and the social and cultural practices that continue to hinder Moroccan women from fully enjoying their freedoms, especially in public spaces. The study has a practical dimension through a case study of a Moroccan schoolgirl, illustrating the restrictions and discrimination that many girls may experience because of their clothing or self-expression.

The study also seeks to contribute to public debate about the effectiveness of existing legislation and the extent to which Morocco complies with its international commitments. It proposes ways to strengthen the effective protection of women within society while respecting difference and freedom of belief.

The importance of the study also lies in its connection of the legal and social dimensions of the phenomenon. This helps explain the gap between legal texts and social practices and opens the way for a more comprehensive approach to women's issues and rights in Moroccan society.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyse the contradiction between legal texts and international conventions ratified by Morocco and the social reality experienced by Moroccan women.
2. To identify social and cultural practices that restrict women's freedom, particularly in relation to clothing and self-expression.
3. To examine a real-life case—a Moroccan schoolgirl—as an example for understanding the effects of such restrictions on girls at an early age.
4. To propose legal and social measures to strengthen the freedom of Moroccan women and protect them from discrimination and restrictions.

Part One: Theoretical Framework

Chapter One: The Reference Framework of International Conventions on Women's Rights and Freedoms

International conventions concerning women's rights and fundamental freedoms provide an important framework for

protecting women's rights in the countries that ratify them, including Morocco. They impose legal obligations on states to comply with their provisions and to bring domestic legislation into line with them.

As a party to these conventions, Morocco is legally bound to implement and respect their principles. They therefore constitute an important legal tool for addressing restrictions on women's freedom. Although the Moroccan Constitution guarantees fundamental freedoms, certain domestic laws and social practices may constrain these freedoms, creating challenges for equality and justice. International commitments consequently provide a reference framework for strengthening women's rights and freedoms and can support efforts to modernise domestic legislation in accordance with international standards, particularly in relation to protocols and conventions to which Morocco has acceded.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) is among the most prominent and comprehensive human-rights conventions. Its first part, particularly Articles 1 and 2, defines discrimination against women and sets out measures intended to protect women from discrimination and enable their participation in society as essential economic, social and political actors.

Part I

Article 1

For the purposes of this Convention, the term "discrimination against women" means any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex that has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status and on a basis of equality between women and men, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

Article 2

States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms and agree to pursue, by all appropriate means and without delay, a policy of eliminating discrimination against women. To this end, they undertake:

To embody the principle of equality between men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation, where this has not yet been done, and to ensure the practical realisation of this principle through legislation and other appropriate means;

- a. To adopt appropriate legislative and other measures, including sanctions where appropriate, prohibiting all discrimination against women;
- b. To establish legal protection for women's rights on an equal basis with men and to ensure, through competent national courts and other public institutions, the effective protection of women against any discriminatory act;
- c. To refrain from engaging in any discriminatory act or practice against women and to ensure that public authorities and institutions act in conformity with this obligation;
- d. To take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organisation or enterprise;

- e. To take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to amend or repeal existing laws, regulations, customs and practices that constitute discrimination against women;
- f. To repeal all national penal provisions that constitute discrimination against women.

United Nations, 1979.

Chapter Two: Challenges Facing Moroccan Women When Their Freedoms Are Restricted on Religious Grounds

Despite Morocco's international commitments, Moroccan women face significant challenges in exercising their freedoms. Religious reference points play a central role in shaping social practices and laws concerning women. Religious interpretations are often used to justify restrictions on women's freedom, whether in clothing, behaviour or social participation. Such restrictions limit women's autonomy and affect their rights to expression and choice.

This situation reflects a complex interaction between religion and domestic law. Tensions may arise between international human-rights principles and conservative religious interpretations, raising the challenge of balancing respect for Islam—which the Moroccan Constitution identifies as the state religion—with individual freedoms and freedom of belief. Article 3 of the 2011 Constitution states that Islam is the religion of the state and that the state guarantees everyone the freedom to practise their religious affairs. The study argues that this context may not adequately account for minorities who do not adhere to Islam and who may be expected to follow educational and social norms that do not reflect their personal convictions. This raises broader questions about respect for difference, freedom of expression and freedom of belief in a society where such respect may remain insufficiently established (Moroccan Constitution, 2011; Education and Training, 1999).

Morocco joined the international system for protecting women's rights through a number of relevant conventions, most notably CEDAW, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, which Morocco joined in 1993, initially with reservations to certain provisions. In 2011, Morocco announced the withdrawal of several reservations, particularly those relating to Article 9(2) and Article 16, while some interpretative declarations and other reservations remained. This process reflects the formal development of recognition of women's rights and efforts to strengthen women's legal and social position and equality with men in education, employment, public life and the family.

This commitment was also reinforced by the 2011 Constitution of the Kingdom of Morocco, which enshrines equality and prohibits discrimination. However, recognition of rights in law remains dependent on their implementation in social, educational and family contexts, and on whether practices and institutions are consistent with Morocco's international commitments.

The impact of laws on women's lived realities also depends substantially on the existence of an environment that accepts equality as a human value and on women's economic, social and political empowerment. Combating discrimination against women therefore requires efforts to analyse non-legal factors, including cultural and social traditions, practices and entrenched stereotypes. Socio-cultural factors and the social structures underlying the phenomenon should be addressed as a cross-cutting objective in

efforts to achieve substantive equality (National Human Rights Council, 2024).

Part Two: Field Study of Restrictions on Moroccan Women's Freedoms

A Case Study of a Moroccan Schoolgirl

Research Problem

Despite legislative progress in Morocco in the field of women's rights, particularly through the 2011 Constitution and the Family Code, and despite Morocco's participation in a number of international conventions, why do restrictions on Moroccan women's personal and legal freedoms persist? To what extent can domestic and international legal provisions protect these rights in everyday life?

Research Questions

1. What are the main forms of restrictions on freedom faced by Moroccan women?
2. How do the Constitution and the Family Code define women's rights and responsibilities?
3. What effect do international commitments have on the status of women in Morocco?
4. How do cultural and social factors affect the implementation of women's rights?

Research Hypotheses

1. There is a substantial gap between legal provisions and the lived reality of Moroccan women.
2. Religious and cultural reference points are used to justify discrimination and restrictions imposed on women's freedom.
3. International conventions are not effectively implemented, limiting their impact on the promotion of women's rights.
4. Weak enforcement and monitoring mechanisms contribute to the continuation of restrictions.

Research Methodology

The field component of this study uses a case-study approach focused on a schoolgirl in an educational setting. The aim is to identify the restrictions she experienced and the associated forms of arbitrariness and exclusion. To collect information directly from the participant, the study used a semi-structured interview based on a set of prepared questions while allowing the schoolgirl to describe her experience freely. This approach was intended to understand the case in its social and educational context and to identify the effects of the practices on her freedom and rights at school.

Case Study: A Schoolgirl

This section examines the case of a Moroccan schoolgirl who experienced exclusion and what she perceived as arbitrary treatment at school because of her clothing. The school considered her clothing—a dress above the knee—to be disrespectful to the school environment under its internal rules. The student, however, viewed the dress as respectful and normal and as a way for a girl to express her femininity. She felt marginalised because her family had raised her in a progressive and open-minded environment.

The case, as presented by the author, highlights a perceived contradiction between Morocco's commitments concerning children's rights, including parental choice in education and upbringing, and practices within the school environment that the student experienced as discriminatory and unequal between the sexes. The article also refers to Morocco's signature of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW on 9 October 1999, which entered into force on 22 December 2000.

For this study, the researcher asked a structured set of case-study questions and allowed the student to answer comfortably about what she experienced and its psychological effects. According to the account, the experience and subsequent treatment came close to pushing her out of formal schooling. Her family's awareness of a French distance-learning option at secondary level helped her avoid the difficulties she was experiencing at school.

After collecting the answers, the researcher organised them in a table and examined each response in detail to develop findings and recommendations for decision-makers. The recommendations call for reconsidering negative treatment of female students who do not identify with conservative dress expectations. The author argues that clothing is not necessarily a measure of respect or morality, but may be a form of self-expression that helps young women develop their identities and independence. The article emphasises the importance of respecting differences in how Moroccan families raise their daughters.

Within the domestic and international legal framework protecting women's rights, the author argues that girls may nevertheless experience real restrictions on their freedoms in schools and local communities, with consequences for academic achievement and psychological and social development and a potential contribution to school dropout.

The case is presented as an example of a Moroccan schoolgirl who faced pressure because of her appearance and relatively liberal clothing choices. She reported being excluded or harassed in different settings because her clothing was regarded by some as immodest or inappropriate, although she understood it as an expression of femininity, maturity and a progressive outlook. The case illustrates the tension between rights recognised in law and actual social practices, as well as obstacles to achieving genuine equality and freedom for Moroccan women.

Research Variables: General Information About the Student

Variable	Information
Sex	Female
Date of birth	05/08/2009 (as stated in the source)
Previous academic year	2021/2022
Educational level at the time	First year of lower secondary education in the Moroccan system
Age at the time of the incident	12

Current academic year	2026/2027
Age at the time of interview	17
Current educational level	Final year of the Baccalaureate
Number of siblings	One sister

Sex as a Variable

The case concerns a female student. Sex is a central variable in this study because the research addresses restrictions on women's freedoms and the different forms of discrimination or exclusion that may arise on the basis of gender within the school environment.

Age as a Variable

The student was 12 years old when the incident occurred and was 17 at the time of the interview, according to the table above—five years after the incident. Despite the passage of time, the experience remained vivid in her memory and continued to affect her negatively, particularly in her educational, social and psychological development.

Educational Level as a Variable

At the time of the incident, the student was in the first year of lower secondary education in the Moroccan system. After continuing to experience bullying and mistreatment at school, she changed from the Moroccan system to the French system in search of an educational environment in which she would feel greater freedom and psychological safety. She nevertheless remained at the former institution until she obtained the lower-secondary certificate. This illustrates the effects of the experience on her educational trajectory and subsequent choices.

Family Structure as a Variable

The student has one sister; the family therefore has two daughters.

Interview Questions and the Student's Responses

1. What event affected your life at school?

Student's response: I was kept out of class for five hours, without lessons, in the school courtyard because I wore a skirt above the knee, even though I was wearing the school smock.

2. Did this event affect your desire to go to school?

Student's response: Yes, very much.

3. How would you have wanted the situation to be handled?

Student's response: I would have wanted to be treated kindly and for my clothing, age and upbringing to be understood.

4. What would you like to change at school regarding this issue?

Student's response: The way clothing is dealt with at school should change, out of respect for differences in each student's upbringing and freedom.

5. What clothing is considered acceptable at school?

Student's response: Trousers with a shirt covering the shoulders, or a long dress, so that what they regard as the body's attractive features are not visible.

6. Who sets these clothing standards?

Student's response: Instructions from the Ministry of Education, based on the institutions' internal regulations.

7. Are clothing standards applied equally to both sexes?

Student's response: There is no equality between the sexes in the wearing of the school smock. There are also differences between students of the same sex at different educational levels: girls in secondary school had more freedom than we did. There was also unequal treatment regarding school outings.

8. Did your relationship with the school and other students change after the incident?

Student's response: A great deal. I am continually bullied because of the incident and because the school does not respect my upbringing. It reached the point where a female friend tried to subject me to violence after writing an essay about the incident that criticised me negatively.

9. What decision did you make regarding the Moroccan school system?

Student's response: I completed the third year of lower secondary school and then left the Moroccan system for the French system, which gave me more freedom and allowed me to choose my preferred specialisation instead of having certain tracks imposed on us. I also wanted to avoid religious studies that, in my view, restrict freedoms.

Analysis of the Interview Responses

1. What event affected your life at school?

The student's answer reveals a school experience that had a clear impact on her educational and psychological life, even after time had passed. She does not recall merely a routine disciplinary incident; rather, she remembers feeling excluded from the educational environment for five hours because of her clothing, despite wearing the school smock. From her perspective, rules concerning clothing and discipline can become an experience of stigma, exclusion and discrimination, especially when the punishment feels disproportionate to the behaviour. Her response also highlights the importance of everyday school experiences in shaping a student's relationship with the institution and her understanding of herself and her rights at school.

2. Did this event affect your desire to go to school?

The answer indicates that the incident was not experienced as a passing disciplinary matter but had a strong effect on the student's motivation to attend school. The intensity of this effect suggests a connection between the negative experience and her feelings toward the school. It may reflect a reduced sense of belonging, safety and comfort in the educational environment. The response also highlights the potential psychological effects of disciplinary practices on educational continuity and participation in school life.

3. How would you have wanted the situation to be handled?

The student wanted the situation to be handled through dialogue and understanding rather than punishment and exclusion. Her answer suggests that she expected the institution to take account of her age, upbringing and personal style of dress, and to guide her in an educationally appropriate way that preserved her dignity and sense of belonging. It underscores the value of educational communication and psychological support in addressing issues of behaviour and clothing, rather than measures that may make a student feel rejected or stigmatised.

4. What would you like to change at school regarding this issue?

The student wants the school to reconsider how it deals with clothing so that it takes account of differences in students' family and cultural backgrounds. Her response highlights the need to balance school rules with respect for students' dignity and personal freedom. Differences in clothing could be addressed through dialogue and educational guidance rather than exclusion or punishment. It also reflects the student's awareness that respect for difference is part of a more inclusive and equitable school environment.

5. What clothing is considered acceptable at school?

The student's response suggests that the school's concept of acceptable clothing is linked to standards of modesty and the covering of body parts that the school environment may regard as physically attractive. Trousers with a shirt covering the shoulders, or a long dress, are preferred. These standards indicate that social and bodily expectations shape how a student may appear at school: clothing is not treated solely as an individual choice but as subject to expectations about what is socially acceptable within the institution.

6. Who sets these clothing standards?

According to the student's understanding, clothing standards are not established independently by the school but are framed by instructions from the Ministry of National Education and implemented through the institution's internal regulations. This suggests that she views the standards as part of the rules governing school life.

7. Are clothing standards applied equally to both sexes?

The student does not believe that clothing standards are applied equally to both sexes. She identifies differences in the wearing of the school smock between boys and girls and differences in freedom among girls at different educational levels, noting that secondary-school girls enjoyed greater freedom than she did. She also reports differences in relation to school outings.

8. Did your relationship with the school and other students change after the incident?

The student reports that her relationship with the school and her peers changed considerably. She says she was repeatedly bullied because of the incident and links this bullying to the school's lack of respect for her upbringing. She also describes an incident in which a female friend allegedly attempted to subject her to violence after writing an essay about the incident that criticised her negatively. Her response indicates that the incident continued to affect her relationships with peers and her broader school experience.

9. What decision did you make regarding the Moroccan school system?

The student completed the third year of lower secondary school and then moved from the Moroccan education system to the French system. She explains that this choice was motivated by a desire for greater freedom in selecting her preferred specialisation and in her studies, rather than having certain educational tracks imposed. She also objects to religious studies that she considers restrictive of freedom. According to her account, the move between educational systems was linked to her wish for greater freedom of choice.

Analysis and Discussion

The case study indicates that, despite the passage of five years, the student continues to remember the incident as a deeply negative experience and a dark point in her life. The persistence of the memory suggests the depth of the impact that some school experiences can have on a child's psychological well-being and memory. Experiences within an educational institution do not necessarily end when the event itself ends; their symbolic and psychological effects may continue for years, leaving childhood memories that remain present in later stages of life.

In terms of educational level, the incident appears to have contributed to the student's aversion to school and nearly led her to leave education, placing her at risk of dropping out. Family intervention and the search for an alternative educational route—the French system, through which she continued secondary education toward the Baccalaureate—helped her avoid permanently leaving education and maintain continuity in her studies.

This case shows that, under certain circumstances, a school environment may shift from being a place of learning, protection and inclusion to becoming a factor that encourages a child to reject school and wish to leave. This may occur when incidents are not handled in accordance with professional ethics and appropriate educational and pedagogical approaches. The case highlights the importance of early educational intervention, listening to children, respecting their dignity and feelings, and resolving school conflicts in ways that prevent a temporary incident from becoming a lasting reason for disengagement.

The incident concerned the student's clothing: she wore a short dress beneath her school smock. The school's response reflected a particular normative view of how a female student should appear in the school environment. By contrast, given that the student's family environment was described as not restrictive, her clothing choice may be understood as a form of self-expression and expression of opinion through personal appearance.

The case reveals tension between conservative assumptions that may inform some school practices and the diverse family and cultural backgrounds children bring to school. Schools do not serve children raised according to a single set of values; they bring different family perspectives on values, clothing and self-expression. This raises the question of how an institution can reconcile its internal rules with respect for children's individuality and their right to express their views and personalities.

The case also raises the relationship between school rules and children's rights, particularly the rights to express opinions and communicate. These rights are not unlimited within an educational institution and remain subject to legal and educational rules

intended to protect school order and the rights of others. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether disciplinary rules exist, but how they are formulated and applied, whether they are proportionate, and whether differences in appearance or cultural and religious background are turned into grounds for exclusion or alienation from school.

The case also invites reflection on how strict responses to difference may affect a child's relationship with school. Feeling that one's identity, appearance or cultural background is not accepted may weaken a sense of belonging and lead to aversion to school, potentially affecting access to education and the development of personal and social capacities.

It further raises the issue of protecting cultural and religious diversity in schools, so that institutional rules do not become a means of erasing difference or excluding students with different cultural backgrounds.

Although Morocco has signed a number of international conventions concerning women's rights and withdrawn several reservations, the author argues that a substantial gap remains between legal commitments and practice. Moroccan women continue to face restrictions on their freedoms in public and private life, and conservative religious reference points may contribute to social restrictions, particularly concerning clothing, freedom of expression and movement. Such restrictions may be evident in public spaces and educational institutions, where girls—including the student examined in this study—may experience exclusion because of personal choices that, in the author's view, do not threaten public order. Although the Constitution provides for equality, some laws, including the Family Code, are described by the author as insufficient to guarantee adequate protection. This presents a continuing challenge in balancing the state's Islamic reference framework with individual freedoms under international standards.

Relevant international conventions recognise parents' right to choose the type of education their children receive, a right connected with family freedom in directing children's education. However, implementation of these principles may face challenges in conservative social and cultural contexts. Schools may impose internal rules about girls' clothing as part of the image or model the institution seeks to promote. Other practices may limit female students' freedom to express themselves and develop their personalities, potentially fostering a sense of inferiority in relation to the opposite sex and affecting their confidence and independence in facing life. The author argues that such expectations may be internalised from the earliest stages of schooling and continue into adulthood.

In conclusion, the school environment is one of the most important settings for socialisation. It does not merely transmit knowledge; it also helps establish values, standards and behaviours that may continue to shape a girl's personality and choices into adulthood. School socialisation should therefore be grounded in the principles of equality and non-discrimination recognised in relevant international conventions and protocols. This would enable women to develop their personalities and abilities while respecting differences in family environments and upbringing. Women, alongside men, are essential to the construction and progress of society. Enabling women to participate actively in society, together with men, can help overcome difficulties, address challenges and build a more balanced and progressive society.

Recommendations

1. Review the internal rules of educational institutions concerning clothing and appearance to ensure consistency with the principles of equality, non-discrimination and the right to education.
2. Involve students, parents and educational staff in developing school rules that affect students' daily lives, promoting dialogue and participation rather than imposing rules unilaterally.
3. Strengthen human-rights education and gender equality within educational institutions to help students develop independent personalities and awareness of their rights and responsibilities.
4. Train educational and administrative staff in children's rights, equality and non-discrimination so that school-rule violations are addressed educationally and in ways that preserve students' dignity and right to learn.
5. Adopt graduated educational measures when school rules are breached and avoid procedures that may lead to exclusion, stigma or interference with the right to education.
6. Strengthen coordination between families and educational institutions to balance the family's right to guide children with the child's right to education, development and personality formation.

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Appendix: Student's Interview Responses

Sex: Female

Date of birth: 05/08/2009 (as stated in the source)

Previous academic year: 2021/2022

Educational level at the time: First year of lower secondary education in the Moroccan system

Age at the time of the incident: 12

Current academic year: 2026/2027

Age at the time of interview: 17

Current educational level: Final year of the Baccalaureate

Number of siblings: One sister

1. What event affected your life at school?

I was kept out of class for five hours, without lessons, in the school courtyard because I wore a skirt above the knee, even though I was wearing the school smock.

2. Did this event affect your desire to go to school?

Yes, very much.

3. How would you have wanted the situation to be handled?

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8. Did your relationship with the school and other students change after the incident?

A great deal. I am continually bullied because of the incident and because the school does not respect my upbringing. It reached the point where a female friend tried to subject me to violence after writing an essay about the incident that criticised me negatively.

9. What decision did you make regarding the Moroccan school system?

I completed the third year of lower secondary school and then left the Moroccan system for the French system, which gave me more freedom and allowed me to choose my preferred specialisation instead of having certain tracks imposed on us. I also wanted to avoid religious studies that, in my view, restrict freedoms.