

Building resilience of Mediterranean rural communities through the empowerment of women

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“We all have an unsuspected reserve of strength inside that emerges when life puts us to the test”.

Isabel Allende

The word resilience has become very fashionable in recent years. It has two distinct meanings that can be applied either to scientific or psycho-social contexts:

- The ability of a material to withstand sudden shocks without breaking;
- The ability of a person to face and overcome adversities.

These two meanings actually have some important features in common: adaptability and the ability to react positively to difficulties and obstacles on a pathway that may be steep and unpredictably arduous.

The word resilience is a fitting term for those involved in agriculture in the broad sense, those who base their everyday life on the land and on taking care of it, those who are directly, and sometimes totally, involved in land, water and crop management.

Therefore, it is fitting for the farmers in the South of the World in general, and Mediterranean farmers in particular. And it is even more fitting for the women farmers of these regions of our planet.

The resilience of women working in agriculture and cultivating the land in an enormous and difficult region like the one we have just mentioned should be considered a quality to encourage, protect and strengthen. The FAO's resilience agenda for agriculture encompasses four actions:

- Enable the environment;
- Watch to safeguard;
- Apply risk and vulnerability reduction measures; and
- Prepare and respond.

The ultimate and major objective of the FAO agenda is to alleviate hunger and achieve food security for all, and gender equality plays a central and decisive role. It could hardly be otherwise, given the number of women working in agriculture and the fundamental weight they have in the household, local and global economies of the countries where they live and work. The virtuous and topical combination of agriculture-women-resilience is worth looking at.

On the other hand, the “Mediterranean Space”, which has always been considered a bridge between Europe and Africa, is nowadays subject to strong dynamics of change generated by conflicts, social problems, economic processes, climatic and political disruptions; these put a severe strain on the population's resilience capacity, and have negative repercussions on entire communities, especially in rural areas.

In fact, if it is true that over the centuries man has become accustomed to facing changes by modifying and adapting his way of living to different environmental and social conditions, thanks also to the precious fund of knowledge and traditional skills of local populations (women in particular that have always held the most ancient and environmental friendly cultivation methods), the ways in which these events occur do not always make it easy for this adaptability to function.

The negative effects of these events are often felt dramatically in the areas of agriculture and food security, health, biodiversity and the natural resources, on which these communities depend for their livelihoods. They are especially felt by women, who represent approximately 43% of the global labour force in agriculture (FAO source) and who produce and process most of the food consumed worldwide.

Furthermore, these effects have also great impacts on food security as traditional food sources are becoming more unpredictable and scarce. Women face loss of income as well as harvests—often their sole sources of food and income. Related increases in food prices make food more inaccessible to poor people, in particular to women and girls whose health has been found to decline more than male health in times of food shortages. Women are often excluded from decision-making on access to and the use of land and resources critical to their livelihoods. For these reasons, it is important that the rights of rural women are ensured in regards to food security, non-discriminatory access to resources, and equitable participation in decision-making processes. (UN WomenWatch, 2009)

In this context, the role of woman as a mother, as the main person responsible for supplying resources (water, foodstuffs, fuel for household use, etc.), as the holder of knowledge (indigenous knowledge) about the territory and local biodiversity (they are able to count on their personal skills, transmit them to the new generations and the domestic agriculture they practice often becomes the only or the most important resource to reduce an endemic condition of poverty), becomes a matter of the utmost importance for implementing actions and strategies aimed at mitigating the negative effects of external factors such as climate changes, conflicts, economic and social crises, etc.

These actions and strategies can no longer be implemented without a gender-sensitive and “holistic” approach and should aim not only at increasing the important role of women (social and economic empowerment) within their communities, but also at improving the level of infrastructures and services that are still lacking or not accessible, tackling legal barrier and inequitable decision-making systems that restricts women’s opportunities and constrains their livelihood options.

Evidence shows that when women that are economically empowered, have the influence, education and information to decide about the use of their income, savings and loans. They also have access to services and resources such as credit institutions. (IFAD 2015)

Too often, the lack of coordination between programmes and institutions, the difficulties of access to land, resources, education and technology, the absence of adequate institutional support, and poor awareness of their own rights prevent women from achieving better integration in the labour market and more appropriate social recognition, not to mention the absence of female participation in decision-making and in resources management due also to several factors including the lack of self-awareness and self esteem.

For years, the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari has been working in this field by implementing programmes and actions relating to gender issues and to the enhancement of the role of women in rural areas of the Mediterranean.

In particular, it is worth recalling the creation in Lebanon, following the conflict in 2006, of a National Observatory for Women in Agriculture and in Rural Areas - NOWARA within the framework of the TERCOM Project “Attivazione di Meccanismi per Sostenere i Territori Rurali e le Comunità in Libano”, funded by the DGCS of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and implemented by CIHEAM-IAMBari in collaboration with the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture and the Lebanese CNRS.

The Lebanese women themselves are at the heart of the initiative: determined, resourceful, “attached” to the family, to the territory and to their cultural heritage, a socio-economic pillar of a country accustomed to coping with emergencies. In one word, they are resilient. Promotion of female entrepreneurship, especially in the rural areas of Lebanon most affected by the consequences of conflicts and economic backwardness, means helping women’s groups to set up a cooperative or a business, to achieve and maintain economic independence, to the direct benefit of entire communities.

In this context, the NOWARA Observatory may be considered an innovative tool for “strengthening” the resilience of entire rural communities by enhancing the active role of women, promoting territorial development and the creation of virtuous dynamics of female labour and employment in the agricultural and agrifood sector for a more prosperous and sustainable economy in rural areas.

The activities implemented by NOWARA have contributed to sustaining the resilience capacity of women farmers and businesswomen, and we hope this will continue. They are summarized as follows:

- Capacity building by organizing training courses on legal, technical, accounting and marketing issues and other specific themes; by creating links with the media and service companies, in order to create the conditions for better access to financial resources, to links with international marketing, research institutes, services for training, problem solving and care of quality aspects;
- Encouraging participation in exhibitions and national and international events to promote the role of businesswomen, to encourage the creation of contacts and new sales channels for typical Lebanese products;
- Establishing Awards and prizes, as tools to enhance the capacities of rural women and encourage development and innovation, by assessing and supporting their activities, so as to create models to extend to rural communities. The winners can spend study periods abroad, participating in training courses and study tours;
- Dissemination of good practices by collecting information and analysing data and the results of activities started, in order to select successful stories highlighting the role of women or groups of women who have distinguished themselves through their work. Some of these good practices have the added benefit that they can be repeated in other similar projects or activities;
- Organization of information and awareness-raising campaigns to allow the economic empowerment of women to be conveyed through an adequate institutional communication strategy via seminars and awareness-raising campaigns directed at the Institutions and at society in general.

To sum up, enhancement of the active role of women has an important role in the promotion of agriculture and of rural areas. Since women are capable of interacting with society in general, with the institutions and professional organizations, they facilitate the coordination of actions. Thus, they influence the global conditions in which they live, by improving the standard of living and their own opportunities for growth to the direct benefit of the entire rural community.

This “value added” - women and their work in agriculture - makes it possible to help provide populations already affected by conflicts and political and economic crises with useful tools, and reference points to mitigate the adverse effects of these events. This enables them to reorganize positively, also at the economic level, small entrepreneurial activities managed by women farmers who consolidate and maintain their self-esteem and self-sufficiency, and then open up new opportunities to enhance their resources.

A further example of activities that the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari has recently implemented to support communities of rural women is the project: “*Developing handicraft skills and enhancing the economic status of women in upper Egypt*” (WEE). The project is directed at rural areas in 12 villages of Middle and Upper Egypt (precisely in the Governorate of Fayoum, Assyut, Sohag and Aswan); these are the poorest areas of the country, where there are some of the highest unemployment and illiteracy rates.

In these areas, livelihoods are essentially based on agriculture, and the risk factors mostly concern extreme climatic conditions and the distances from urban centres, which oblige most of the inhabitants to live in conditions of poverty and economic isolation.

It is almost always the women who pay the highest price for this isolation. They are victims of systematic discrimination in the family and community, and suffer a greater degree of poverty and a worse quality of life. Young people are also directly disadvantaged by their mothers’ lack of education. In fact, this lack of education means that little attention is paid to health, so that there are more diseases, more malnutrition and higher rates of infant mortality.

The WEE project, aimed at female communities living in these villages, aims to increase their social and economic role by improving their capacity to produce and market foodstuffs and non-food goods.

To achieve this objective, activities have been planned that will help these groups of women to improve their economic and social rights, to express and develop their knowledge, abilities and talents, raising their awareness of fundamental rights and self-confidence, and thereby improving their own and their families' living conditions.

In fact, the project not only provides them with the basic knowledge and the technical means to improve their social and economic conditions, but also aims to support them in creating new business activities in the handicraft, agriculture and service sectors. It does this through Capacity Building activities, seminars, courses, "Training of Trainers", technical assistance on the access to micro-credit programmes, Networking and traineeships in Italy.

In particular, the project's activities and expected results are:

- Preliminary market study to identify needs and the capacity to absorb the goods produced by the women benefitting from the project;
- Educational support to women at various levels to enable them to define and choose their activity, to start commercial activities via single or group initiatives;
- Technical and financial support (micro-credit) provided to project beneficiaries for them to start up small businesses and sell their products on the domestic and foreign markets;

Strengthening the social and economic role of rural women has therefore been recognized among the actions to be promoted and encouraged also in emergency programmes to support countries experiencing severe economic crises, victims of conflicts or migration, and climate disruption.

The strategic role of women in the Mediterranean

There are many cooperation activities that may contribute to mitigating the effects of these situations by promoting an active role for women in the economy of Mediterranean countries, and these could possibly be repeated in other countries with different economic, social and geographic conditions:

- Institutional building, knowledge development, awareness raising and training: institutional building activities in order to make the key authorities (at local or national level) aware of the enhancement of women's work and entrepreneurship also using awareness-raising tools; TRAINING of women farmers and entrepreneurs on specific subjects related to their activities (crop production, marketing, promotion of traditional and local products, etc.);
- Support for women's activities/ideas: Promotion of actions supporting start-up ideas and women's entrepreneurial activities. Providing women entrepreneurs with easier access to credit;
- Enhancement of women's knowledge, cultural heritage and local traditions: Enhancement of women's knowledge about local products and cultural heritage is often beneficial to the development of a certain community, an area or a Region. The promotion of local traditions and enhancement of the healthy Mediterranean diet (Women are the "natural carriers" of the Mediterranean diet, declared Intangible heritage by UNESCO);
- Gender-related studies and research: Promotion of specific research, studies and collection of gender-disaggregated data on women and agriculture, as well as food production and traditional handicraft products processed by women;
- Support for women's associations/cooperatives: Establishment and support of women's associations and cooperatives that gather women living in the same environment and socio-economic conditions, because "union is strength".

Gender Issue in the CIHEAM Strategic agenda 2025

This year CIHEAM adopted its new Strategic Agenda 2025 containing 15 Thematic Priorities for the Mediterranean development. One of these objectives is devoted to the gender equality and the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Well aware that gender equality and the participation of vulnerable groups must be at the heart of all the activities of CIHEAM and its institutes, and that inclusive development represents both a goal and a process, CIHEAM, nevertheless, wished to devote a full objective dedicated to this issue because of the peculiar situation of women employment in the Mediterranean.

According to ILO statistics in 2012, the employment rate of women in North Africa-Middle East region is the lowest in the world. For women between 15 to 64 years it is 24 % in Morocco, 28% in Tunisia and 26 % in Turkey. On average 3 out of 4 women of working age are neither employed nor looking for work, which represents a shortfall for the economic and social development in these countries.

However, these figures do not mean that the huge majority of women do not work. Women spend several hours per day of domestic work, unpaid, poorly valued and also on informal work. Mostly in rural areas, their work is often invisible because it merges with domestic work and the possibilities of developments are extremely low due to poor or no access to the property or bank loans. The valuation and recognition of their work could be an important source of empowerment of women and thus of development and growth for these countries.

Therefore the aim here is twofold: to help changing the society in order to erase the barriers excluding vulnerable groups and thus value the work of women, whether reproductive or productive, and increase their capacity and influence by providing better access to a quality employment.

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