

Palestinian Women Empowerment in Rural Areas: 35 years of achievements in collaboration with PARC and rural women

Athar Hodali for the Agricultural Development Association – PARC

Palestine is a country located on the Eastern Coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It is considered part of the Levant with an estimated area of 27,000 km² and it extends to the Jordan Valley. Its population recorded during the mid-2016 is estimated at 4.81 million people in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. 73.9% of these people live in urban areas, 16.6% in rural areas, while 9.5% of them live in refugee camps.

Palestine has the highest population density in the world, especially in the Gaza Strip. The estimated population density for the year 2016 is of approximately 800 persons/km²; 519 persons/km² in the West Bank and 5,154 persons/km² in the Gaza Strip.

Given the sensitive political situation of Palestine, the percentage of families that are headed by women has increased, amounting to 10.9% of the total of the Palestinian families in 2015, 12.2% in the West Bank and 8.6% in the Gaza Strip. In addition, the percentage of female participation in the labour force is low compared to males. The female participation rate is 19.4%, 17.7% in the West Bank and 22.3% in the Gaza Strip. The female unemployment rate stood at 42.8% against 22.3% for men.

The National strategy for the Agricultural Sector and the Millennium Goals

The implementation of the 17 sustainable development goals for the year 2030 officially started in January 2016. These goals were adopted in September 2015 during a historic international summit; participating countries, including Palestine, will mobilise efforts to eliminate poverty in all its forms over the coming fifteen years. In addition to fighting against inequality and addressing climate change, although it is not legally binding, governments are expected to develop national frameworks to achieve these goals. The

Palestinian national strategy for the agricultural sector includes 9 of the 17 SDGs, especially, those related to the second goal: "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture".

Agricultural Sector and Rural Woman in Palestine

The agricultural sector in Palestine is considered one of the most important pillars of Palestinian resilience in facing Israeli Occupation. It is a major component of the cultural, social and economic spheres. This sector provides food security and helps reduce unemployment and poverty. It is characterised by diversity in terms of agricultural production as a result of the diversity of climates in Palestine. It shows interesting scope for expansion due to irrigation and crop exports and is able to keep up with the latest technical developments due to the suitability of existing agricultural patterns and the existence of pioneering farmers and producers. The agricultural sector is therefore very effective in creating employment opportunities and in contributing to sustainable development.

Since the 1990s, the agricultural sector has faced several difficulties due to Israeli Occupation under which agricultural lands are attacked and water resources controlled. Due to the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip since 2007, 20% of agricultural land has not been accessible. More than 3,000 fishermen are unable to reach 82% of the marine areas agreed under the Oslo Agreement of 1992. These restrictions cause annual losses in agricultural production and affect development. The losses of the fishing sector are estimated at an annual 80 million US dollars.

Rural Woman

Women play a major role in the comprehensive development process in communities, especially

communities that work in agriculture and grazing. Official statistics in Palestine show that women participation in economic activity does not exceed 16% (19% in WB and 9% in GS). Women carry out 87% of the agricultural animal production labour and 54% of agricultural plant production labour, which are a source of income for thousands of Palestinian families in Palestine, in addition to their role in securing the food basket by supplying fruits and vegetables.

Results show that agriculture provides 11.5% of employment opportunities and represents 5.6% of GDP and 21% of total exports. The agricultural sector is considered the main employer of women. About one-sixth of women work in agricultural professions (20%) and, the services sector is the second largest employer of women. The percentage of women participating in the agricultural sector is 35.4% (32.3% in WB and 46.1% in GS). The percentage of agricultural holdings owned by women is estimated at 6.7% of total agricultural holdings which indicates that large holdings are managed by men. The agricultural sector including forestry and fishing suffers from low wages: the average wage is NIS 65 in the WB and NIS 20 in GS.

Challenges Faced by Rural Women

Rural Palestinian women face different challenges including:

- 1) tradition, as the Palestinian community is considered a male dominated society; this affects women's ability to study, work, and freely leave their houses. It is important to note that rural women face different types of gender-based violence;
- 2) limited access to and control of resources including funding resources, educational institutions, and difficulties in controlling women's rights due to weak policies.

PARC: 35 Years Working with Rural Women

PARC has been working with rural women for sustainable rural development for the past 35 years. It was initiated by group of agricultural engineers volunteering to support farmers and rural areas as a means of protecting Palestinian lands from confiscation by Israeli occupation, and providing rural families with good income to live with dignity while protecting their lands.

PARC has adopted several approaches including social participation, volunteerism, transparency, accountability, experience sharing, and learning and thus, has become a pioneering institution in Palestinian rural development.

PARC aims to achieve sustainable development by working at all levels of the community, and especially with women. Through its technical agricultural extension programme launched in 1983 which initially targeted men only, PARC discovered that such a programme is also required for women. PARC strives to provide female agricultural engineers and extension workers with proper extension services. Social restrictions and barriers prevent these women from receiving guidance from male agricultural engineers.

Through the agricultural extension programme, PARC found that women carry out 67% of agricultural work, whilst extension services are only provided for men. Based on the dire need to provide women with such services, PARC started targeting female agricultural engineers and providing them with the necessary extension services.

Between 1987 and 1992, during the first Intifada, when roads were closed, Israeli products were boycotted, and a curfew was put in place. PARC focused on a home economics programme targeted

at rural women with the aim of achieving food security for the rural community in general. This situation had positive effects on the resilience of rural communities enabling them to become more dependent on local products and food processing by using the surplus fruits and vegetables to produce frekeh, jams and maftool.

PARC encourage women to adopt a collective approach and adapt to the regulatory framework through working by exploring new different regulatory framework possibilities, especially those with special focus. This comes from PARC's belief in local community capabilities to effect change through these different types of regulation.

In 1997, PARC was unique in adopting gender-focused programmes to integrate gender into its policies and procedures. Gender is considered one of the main priorities at PARC and women are included in all its programmes and activities. Women are members of the general assembly, the board of directors and the monitoring committee. In the executive team there is no discrimination on the basis of sex in various privileges and women even receive their holiday rights, salaries, and allowances as stipulated in international laws and charters.

Five years later, PARC worked with a qualified team of rural women to design a comprehensive development programme for rural women including the project of establishing women's clubs to work in privacy due to cultural issues. Then PARC developed its steps toward having specialized centers for women that women clubs established in 1994 in rural areas for its desired need to work in such clubs for its privacy due to cultural issues.

Economic Empowerment Programme

PARC also believes in the importance of empowering women economically, help them develop their skills, integrate them in the production process, provide them with access to financial resources and enabling them to have their own small businesses. A project incubator was set up by PARC aimed at providing women with loans to facilitate the establishment of small income-generating projects to achieve self-sufficiency and allowing a source of income for women's families.

Credit and Saving Programme

In 2000, PARC introduced a credit and saving programme aimed at empowering women economically and increasing access to income resources by offering a diversity of grant options such as individual and collective grants encouraging women to work in cooperatives.

PARC had helped women gain legal and societal legitimacy and to overcome many of the obstacles they faced. This paved the way for women to claim their civil, economic or political rights.

It is important to present one of the success stories. Madlein Kallab, 17 years old challenged traditions by becoming one of the fishers after the illness of her father preventing him from providing his family with a proper income. She proved that women can go beyond restrictions and are able to ride the wave and raft it to achieve their objectives. Madlein, the daughter of the sea, as she is called by the fishermen did not choose to work in the sea but the sea has chosen her. She loved the sea in her childhood during her fishing trips with her father. The difficult circumstances gave birth to a challenge so she learned to ride the sea to get fishing protected from the people's question, and created between the nets a bridge from the safety bar for her fear of being falling into poverty and destitution.

We would like to conclude this paper with three recommendations:

- 1 Improving the legal environment for rural women, through:
 - a. The organisation of advocacy campaigns to encourage female farmers to claim their right to inherit agricultural land and to consider the inheritance of the Shari'a Court as an executive order, thus facilitating their access to finance and land control. This requires the relevant institutions to be registered in the name of the applicant.
 - b. The submission of applications to amend Palestinian laws (Agricultural Law and Labour Law) to address women's issues and comply with the international conventions and agreements signed by the Palestinian Authority.
 - c. The promotion of the role of women and their integration into unions and specialised agricultural cooperative societies and agricultural committees. They should be enabled to obtain leadership roles.

d. Support of rural women's participation in public life and the promotion of women's institutions to support them in all fields (institutions can partially contribute to registration fees and membership of female farmers in cooperatives).

2 Improving the land that supports rural women, through:

a. Rehabilitation and improvement of agricultural roads, to facilitate farmers' access to markets.

b. Appropriate support to rural women for land reclamation in border areas, which enables them to register land in their names.

c. The expansion of the process of formal agricultural extension services, both in terms of quantity and type (number of guides and specialisations).

d. The establishment of sufficient and competitive storage and cooling companies to maintain surplus production and improve sales in different seasons.

3 Rural women capacity building and economic empowerment by:

a. Determining the real needs of rural women in the agricultural sector and formulating plans for rapid intervention as needed and providing them with integrated services.

b. Building their negotiating capacity and providing different choices through networking and promoting collective work to ensure the best prices in selling and buying and looking for new marketing means.

c. Providing specialised technical training and introducing new production techniques for post-harvest operations.

d. Providing administrative and financial training for rural women on the feasibility study of projects and bookkeeping to improve revenues, reduce costs, and increase profits.

e. Providing grants and soft loans for rural women to develop their projects.

References

1. Palestine Statistical Book of 2016, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.
2. Agricultural Sector Strategy "Resilience and Sustainable Development" 2017-2022, Ministry of Agriculture.
3. "Promoting the Status and Role of Women in the Palestinian Agricultural Sector", Palestinian Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS)
4. "Fact Sheet on the Rights of Female Farmers", Karem Nashwan, November 2016

