

# FAO's commitment to empowering rural women in the Near East and North Africa region

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The rural economy in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) is undergoing a rapid social and economic transformation. Exacerbated by climate change, demographic pressure and migration have contributed to the decline of food self-sufficiency and increased incidences of rural poverty. Within this context, women's role as food producers has increased exponentially, mostly due to the gendered segmentation of the labour market that has resulted in women farmers' preponderance in rural production systems. Women constitute a significantly smaller share of all landowners than men, despite their active engagement in agriculture. Yet, sustaining women producers is crucial to the survival of small-scale agriculture in the region. This paper explores these challenges and highlights policy and development efforts undertaken to empower rural women in the agricultural and rural sector in North Africa and some efforts deployed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

## **Background on the situation of rural women in the agriculture sector in the region**

Women's role in agriculture across the Near East and North Africa (NENA) has increased through the effects of various drivers of structural and rural transformation. This trend is especially pronounced in North Africa, where the share of women in agriculture increased from about 30% in 1980 to 43% in 2010. In many countries of the region, agricultural incomes are no longer sufficient to sustain the livelihoods of rural men and women. This has resulted in large waves of male migration from rural areas to cities as well as abroad to work as wage labourers, with women staying behind and mainly practicing subsistence agriculture as they lack other economic opportunities. In this context, the importance of women's roles as food

producers has increased dramatically, giving rise to what has become known as the feminisation of agriculture in the region. This phenomenon is also underscored by the diversification out of family farming induced by demographic pressures and land fragmentation, the intensification of agriculture (which may increase the need for female labour and decrease the need for male labour), the parallel growth of non-agricultural jobs, and social and cultural norms that affect women's and men's mobility and livelihoods<sup>6</sup>.

Rural women in the region typically work long hours, engaged mainly in non-mechanised, labour-intensive, non-capital intensive activities and have primary responsibility for the husbandry of small animals and ruminants. Despite their important role in agriculture, women own and hold less land than men, i.e. up to 15% and their land is often not as fertile. Women also hold smaller land plots than men, often impeding mechanisation and the development of infrastructure such as irrigation that could improve yields. In addition, the high illiteracy rate of rural women severely limits their agency and this is a major handicap for their active participation in associations and organisations. Land tenure and property rights are usually required as collaterals for loans.

As a consequence, women face several constraints in accessing credit and other financial services needed to build up capital and start an enterprise, and to acquire equipment or the skilled labour required in the production process. This virtually cuts them off from related decision-making processes, support systems, new technologies, rural services and training. Consequently, most often, women farmers remain in the lower segments of the agricultural value chains. In addition, competition over scarce resources, especially water, is high between smallholders and

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/bodies/NERC\\_34/NERC\\_34\\_INF/MW127\\_INF\\_8/MW127\\_NERC\\_18\\_INF\\_8\\_en.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/bodies/NERC_34/NERC_34_INF/MW127_INF_8/MW127_NERC_18_INF_8_en.pdf)

those with large irrigated farms with better access to pumps and water drills.

Women are also the main caregivers in the household. This affects the amount of time they have available to work in productive activities. Young women have higher probability of being unemployed than young males. In many countries of the region, unemployment rates among young women aged 15–24 approach 50%, compared to 10–20% for males. The main factors hindering female labour force in NENA are weak support systems (such as public transportation and child care services), educational disadvantages and wage discrimination.

The traditional role of women as natural resource managers in rural communities also makes them especially vulnerable to climate change for two reasons. First, these predominantly rain-fed systems are highly reliant on climate for their productivity, which makes them highly exposed. Second, because women face structural barriers and limited diversification options, they have less capacity to adapt to climate change. Their lower adaptive capacity results in exacerbated well-being, impacts on individuals, households, and communities. Nevertheless, rural women play a key role buffering the family against unexpected climatic shocks. Their knowledge of ecosystems, their skills and abilities, social networks and community organisations help communities mitigate hazardous conditions and events and respond effectively to disasters. This further justifies the need for their empowerment..

### **FAO's commitment to gender equality in the region**

FAO's recent biennial Regional Conferences have set priorities to reduce gender inequalities in

agriculture and in the rural sector of the Near East and North Africa. Strengthening rural institutions, developing female and youth human capital and promoting a holistic understanding of social dynamics in rural areas were all addressed and discussed with the Ministers present at the 32<sup>nd</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Regional Conferences. The Ministerial Declaration on "Reiterate(s) the importance of inclusive and sustainable development, that fully encompasses agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and livestock and gives equal employment and development to vulnerable people including youth and women, in the framework of promoting peace and stability in the region" is duly reflected in the FAO's Regional Gender Equality Strategy<sup>7</sup> for the Near East adopted in 2017 and underscored by a wide range of interventions described below.

### **Specific areas of action: Gender and water governance**

Over half of the region's rural poor population live in water-scarce countries and do not have access to safe and reliable supplies of water for productive and domestic use. Women are seriously affected by water scarcity due to their role in managing both domestic and productive water use. Under the conditions of climate change and growing resource scarcity in the region, FAO's Water Scarcity Initiative aims to combine the triple objectives of increasing agriculture productivity, efficient use of water and income diversification for small farmers and rural women. Gender dimensions focus on the adoption of gender-sensitive water efficiency and productivity frameworks and the promotion of on-farm technologies and incentive frameworks to promote the uptake of on-farm good practices.

Through this initiative, FAO promotes legal and regulatory frameworks as well as institutional arrangements that enable the integration of

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7116e.pdf>

gender-sensitive approaches to water resource management and decision-making at national and local levels. Intersectoral multi-disciplinary analyses of transboundary water governance, encompassing socio-economic and gender issues have also been conducted in a number of countries of the region (Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan), enabling future water resource management strategies that have the potential to be truly sustainable and inclusive.

### **Small-Scale family farming and gender-sensitive value-chains**

This Initiative covers three main components:

- a)** Evidence-based policy and strategies to improve and enhance the small-scale agricultural sector and the livelihoods of those involved;
- b)** Sustainable improvement of small-scale agriculture productivity, aimed at including youth in the agricultural sector; and
- c)** Institutional strengthening and empowerment of smallholders, through support for enabling environments for economically viable and sustainable small-scale agriculture.

Gender-sensitive interventions of the initiative focus on priority agro-food value chains in the region through gender-sensitive agro-food value chain assessments, understanding of the major constraints, barriers and opportunities for women and assisting governments in building an institutional and policy environment that promotes decent work for rural and migrant women and men, addressing gender discrimination, occupational health and safety, and minimum wages in particular. Country-specific legal and policy reforms are also encouraged to ensure equitable land laws and guarantee women's right to land.

### **Putting empowerment into action in Tunisia – two complementary initiatives**

A project under the umbrella of the FAO's Multipartner Programme Support Mechanism (FMM) implemented in Tunisia drives significant changes for the benefits of women clam fishers and serves as an entry point for other groups along the Tunisian coast. Beneficiary women associations and cooperatives received training in business management, and post-harvest and processing good practices, resulting in their economic and social

empowerment. The project aims to put the FAO's gender equality objectives into practice by making clam fishers aware of their rights and getting them involved in decision-making process, developing their entrepreneurship skills, engaging them in protecting biodiversity and responsible fisheries and providing opportunities for diversification of their outlets and alternative income sources.

Since 2015, the CIHEAM and FAO have established a successful strategic partnership to strengthen the livelihoods of rural communities in the Mediterranean region, as part of efforts undertaken to promote food and nutrition security, rural development and improved management of scarce water resources for agriculture. The CIHEAM Bari and FAO have also a long-standing collaboration encompassing a wide range of activities, including capacity enhancement and assistance to governments with policies and programmes tailored to empower small-scale farmers and fishers, improve their livelihood opportunities and resilience and ensure equal opportunities for men and women.

In 2017, the CIHEAM Bari and the FAO started to work together to improve the livelihoods of women in three coastal communities in southern Tunisia, namely Jderia, Ajim and El Grine. This new partnership was designed to address women's multifaceted challenges by providing financial resources through microcredit overseen by a Tunisian microfinance institution, vocational and financial literacy training, identifying alternative income-generation activities, and required infrastructure and marketing opportunities. A thorough assessment of capacity needs was conducted to analyse the complex livelihood situation of women clam collectors and design training activities, coaching and mentoring, and micro-projects. Training activities focused on building group cohesion, self-confidence and unlocking women's entrepreneurial potential. In addition, representatives of three women's groups will participate in a study tour to Italy and attend various training activities organised at IAM BARI's Tricase centre on seafood processing, pasteurisation and HACCCP standards, and learn from the experience of Italian private companies working with small-scale fisheries. Women beneficiaries from the three communities have appreciated the "real life skills, group cohesion and solidarity" provided by the initiative through training and mentoring, as well as the opportunity to unlock their entrepreneurial spirit and stand on their own feet".

<http://www.fao.org/in-action/women-in-agrifood-value-chains/fao-project-supports-women-clam-collectors-in-tunisia/en/>

[http://www.iamb.it/uploads/attachments/366/CIHEAM-FAO\\_Project\\_in\\_Tunisia.pdf](http://www.iamb.it/uploads/attachments/366/CIHEAM-FAO_Project_in_Tunisia.pdf)

### **The need for better statistical data on women's participation in the rural sector**

There is limited accurate, detailed and up-to-date statistical data on the involvement of women in the agricultural sector in this region, including statistical information on women's resources and access to assets. In addition, agricultural statistics tend to under-represent, or even omit variables that are essential to a clear understanding of rural sector activities and rural development mainly because this work is unpaid and not considered productive. This severely limits policymakers and practitioners' ability to grasp the real situation in rural economies which, in turn, limits their potential to strengthen those economies.

The demand for specific data and indicators incorporating a gender perspective has risen in the region in recent years. The general awareness of the need for a gender perspective in development policy formulation, and of the corresponding need for pertinent statistics, is now well established, and the demand from member states to work on this has come from the highest levels. Closing the information gap on gender and agriculture will increase the ability of governments and development partners to design and scale up agricultural innovations that reduce gender inequality on the ground and contribute more effectively to poverty reduction, improved food security, nutrition and environmentally sustainable livelihoods.

FAO continues to support member countries to take stock of their current capacity for generating and analysing sex-disaggregated data and related indicators and will support two workshops on the use of sex-disaggregated data for capacity building and policy formulation. In addition, FAO, as a custodian UN agency of Target 5.a of SDG 5 addressing issues of access to ownership and control over agricultural land, leads an extensive process for the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for the governance of tenure for land and other gender-responsive development interventions.

### **The way forward for the empowerment of women in the region**

It is clear that more focused and concerted efforts are needed by all stakeholders present in the southern Mediterranean region to ensure that rural institutions serve both women and men.

This will require strong and inclusive rural institutions such as producer organisations that are essential for poverty reduction and economic development that benefits small-scale women farmers. Both public and private service providers operating in rural areas, including those offering extension, animal health or financial services will need to better consider the specific needs of rural women for the benefit of the entire communities. FAO is committed to increasing support for mechanisms that build social capital with female entrepreneurs such as cooperatives and rural women's business associations to access wider markets and increase the value of their products and reinforce technical assistance provided to promote gender-sensitive agricultural extension services. It is important that research institutions focus more on agriculture practices that are climate-smart and labour-saving technologies that can benefit women farmers.

FAO shares the commitment for the need to integrate agricultural initiatives into a broader development vision for the sector that includes developing the potentials of smallholders alongside large-scale commercial agriculture and promotes gender-responsive interventions for a prosperous and stable future for the region.