

POLICY BRIEF

Gender, livestock rearing, rangeland use, and climate change adaptation in Tunisia

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Summary overview:

Women's contributions to rangeland cultivation and management in Tunisia, and the effects of climate change upon women's livelihoods, are both policy blind spots. Despite women's growing participation in rangeland management, an outcome at least in part because of male outmigration to urban areas and increased availability of non-farming economic opportunities for men and youth, women are assumed in policy circles not to be involved in livestock-rearing activities, or in rangeland management at large.

To make women's contributions to rangeland cultivation more visible, and to provide policy recommendations based on women's needs and priorities for the reforms currently being made to the pastoral code in Tunisia, we conducted fieldwork in three governorates in northern and southern Tunisia (see Figure 1 for the locations of study communities). For both women and men, we identified the roles played in rangeland management, needs and priorities, and the impacts of climate change upon lives and livelihoods. We conducted focus groups and interviews with a total of 289 individuals.

We found that both men and women are negatively affected by rangeland degradation and water scarcity, but that women are additionally disadvantaged by their inability to own land and access credit, and by training in drought mitigation and rangeland rehabilitation that only targets men. Our findings reveal that women are involved in livestock grazing and rearing activities to a greater extent than is assumed in practitioner and policy circles, but in different ways to men from the same households and communities. Understanding how women use rangelands is a necessary first step to ensuring that they benefit from rangeland management on a par with men. Women's feedback and priorities should therefore be considered critical for the sustainable and equitable use and management of rangelands.



Figure 1. Map showing the location of our research sites in Tunisia

Key findings:

In dry communities, both men and women are negatively affected by rising temperatures, reduced precipitation, soil erosion and other manifestations of climate change. However, they bear the costs and effects of climate change in different ways, often based on socially ascribed gender roles and responsibilities.

Men appear to bear more of the financial stress of new costs incurred in responding to the effects of climate change. These costs include hiring labor for planting trees to combat desertification, and purchasing feed from the market to supplement the dwindling amount of forage supplies that can be gathered from rangelands.



Photo: Rangelands in Southern Tunisia
(Photo Credit Zied Ldoudi ICARDA)



Photo: Women collecting feed from rangelands in Southern Tunisia
(Photo Credit Zied Ldoudi ICARDA)

Women, on the other hand, appear to undertake more of the manual labor and drudgery associated with responding to climate change. This includes activities such as walking greater distances to collect forage, and bathing and cleaning up after livestock.

We found that rangeland farmers, irrespective of gender, do not have adequate access to agricultural extension services, credit services and banking institutions, or training to support income generation and livelihood diversification. But women often experience additional challenges due to gender norms and cultural practices. For example, our findings suggest that since women rarely own land, and are therefore unable to offer land titles as collateral, they face greater challenges than men in accessing loans and credit. Women also have weaker access than men to extension services and training in skills deemed masculine, such as irrigation and other drought-mitigation strategies.

Rural women in Tunisia are more actively involved in grazing livestock, and more broadly in livestock rearing and agricultural production, than is assumed in practitioner and policy circles. In addition to contributing increasing amounts of labor to livestock rearing, women also participate to a limited extent in decision making about livestock and rangeland management, through forums such as cooperatives.



Photo: Sheep flock on rangelands site in Southern Tunisia
(Photo Credit Zied Ldoudi ICARDA)

In recent years, rural households in Tunisia have been rearing smaller numbers of livestock than they did previously. Farmers attribute the decrease in herd size to higher mortality of livestock through heat and dehydration, and reduced availability of grazing area, shade, fodder, and water. Fodder production is important for rural populations that are dependent on rangelands for farming and livestock rearing because it allows farmers to mitigate the risks of food shortages for humans by maintaining the health and productivity of livestock (Ayantunde et al. 2017).

Because women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change, they also benefit more from access to risk mitigation strategies and tools (Bageant and Barrett 2017; Chanamoto and Hall 2015). But women are often unable to access training and innovations which may mitigate the effects of climate change on a par with men. Skills and training related to drought and irrigation, for example, are targeted almost exclusively to men.

More generally, we found that most of the training about drought management focused on supplementary and alternative irrigation techniques and practices. Other complementary drought mitigation and management strategies such as the introduction of cacti, including as livestock feed, and other drought-tolerant crops and animal breeds are not presently being explored by agricultural extension and training programs in Tunisia.

Just as women express interest in learning skills that were traditionally only offered to men, we found that many men are interested in learning skills, such as cheesemaking, that are traditionally only offered to women. Since livelihood diversification and rangeland protection are shared priorities for rural Tunisians, irrespective of gender, it is also important for men to have opportunities to pursue livelihood opportunities that are traditionally deemed “women’s work” without experiencing social stigma or censure.

The recommendations we make in this paper are particularly timely given the reforms currently being made to the pastoral code in Tunisia (Werner et al. 2018) to address the severe economic, social, environmental, and cultural costs of rangeland degradation across the country.

Policy insights:

Women's growing involvement in livestock rearing and agricultural production must be supported with commensurate social and economic policy interventions. Providing both male and female farmers with appropriate supports to optimize rangeland cultivation and productivity is particularly urgent and important in the context of resource degradation accelerated by climate change.

Optimizing women's ability to contribute their insights and knowledge about rangeland management, and to voice their priorities and needs, should be a priority for government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international agricultural and development organizations interested in the sustainable management and development of rangelands.

Preventing further degradation of rangelands is vital for enabling farmers to continue food and forage production. However, creating access to fodder markets and providing subsidies to enable farmers to purchase fodder are also important as complementary measures to ensure that livestock have fodder supplies and that rangelands are occasionally allowed to remain fallow in order to regenerate.

It is crucial that women gain access to drought management and adaptation training on a par with men. Alongside this, it is also important to create more visibility and social acceptance for women in roles that are currently deemed masculine, such as irrigation, grazing and marketing. This will enable more women to participate in rangeland cultivation and livestock rearing on a more equal footing with men and to voice their concerns and priorities in policy dialogues.

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