

POLICY BRIEF

Making Egyptian women's agricultural labor visible and improving their access to productive assets

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In rural Egypt, social norms frame women as “helpers” to their families and husbands instead of as workers in their own right. Women are assumed not to contribute to agriculture or participate in irrigation. However, a series of recent studies by ICARDA have told a very different story. Women play key roles in agricultural production and food security in rural Egypt, even as their contributions are undervalued and they face difficulties earning decent wages and accumulating assets.

Only 18.5% of women participate in the labor force in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the lowest level in the world. In Egypt, women constitute 25% of the labor force. This low percentage reflects an overwhelming focus in official labor statistics on formal sector work, which often ignores women's informal labor contributions. Women tend to be employed in large numbers in Egypt in the informal sector and in home-based work. Work in rural areas is often seasonal and gender-segregated, which can also render women's work less visible.

In many parts of the developing world, including Egypt, labor policies tend to be designed for the formal workforce and enforced, if at all, mostly in urban settings. Therefore, developing and enforcing labor policies and regulations which account both for rural work and informal work is an important priority. This will render women's labor contributions, particularly in rural areas, more visible. Furthermore, men and women in both urban and rural areas in Egypt generate livelihoods through engagement in discrete and overlapping categories of work. For example, it is possible for the same individual to be a wage worker, an entrepreneur, and a contributing family worker, but policy frameworks are required to distinguish between and respond with suitable interventions for discrete categories of work, which may in practice require complementary cross-cutting interventions. The rural Egyptian context has also

experienced many changes in the past few decades which labor policies should account for. These include impacts of globalization, urbanization, climate change, domestic and international migration, return migration, and the fallouts and consequences of the Revolution of January 2011.

Research in the Old and New Lands

Three research projects were conducted in two regions of Egypt: the Old Lands, represented by the community of Kafr Sheikh, and New Lands, represented by the community of Noubariya. These two regions have common socio-cultural, historical, and economic ties but differ significantly where these relate to women's landownership and participation in public life.

The New Lands are desert lands that have been reclaimed and cultivated since the Revolution of 1952 in Lower Egypt and the building of the High Aswan Dam. The Noubariya settlement in the New Lands was only reclaimed in the 1990s by the Mubarak Resettlement Scheme (MRS) implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation. Irrigation in the New Lands is based primarily on drip and sprinkler systems. The Old Lands, on the other hand, had been irrigated by the natural overflow of the Nile river and settled for thousands of years before the High Aswan Dam was built. Flood irrigation continues

to be a common method of irrigation in the Old Lands, although certain villages in Kafr Sheikh also have an irrigation system called *tatweer*, which enables distribution of water to agricultural land via a network of lined canals, thereby reducing water loss and ensuring more equitable distribution of water to farmers.

In the Old Lands, only 2–6% of land is owned by women. The Noubariya settlement presents an interesting contrast, as the World Food Program (WFP) provided food aid to settlers on the condition that women received 20% of the distributed land titles. Settlers who held a university degree or diploma were given larger parcels. The WFP also insisted on the inclusion of women in leadership positions on formal committees

such as Water User Associations (WUAs) and Local Agricultural Cooperatives (LACs). The WUAs are responsible for scheduling water use, resolving conflict over water use, and providing irrigation training. The LACs are responsible for distribution of inputs such as fertilizer and microcredit, enforcing crop rotations, and providing agricultural training. The International Fund for Agricultural Development and the MRS training program provided formal leadership training to both male and female graduate settlers in the early 1990s. Taken together, these interventions created important and visible roles for women in agriculture in the New Lands. This is quite different from the Old Lands, where women are far less likely to attend training or participate in public life even when they own or manage land.



Women make up just **25%** of Egypt's labor force in formal employment – but a much **larger, uncounted share** in informal employment



43% of women

24% of men

are employed in agriculture



Respondents for research on assets and irrigation:

202 women surveyed | **200 men** surveyed | **120** semi-structured interviews

Respondents for research on decent work:

85 interviews | **12 focus groups** | total of **127 respondents**



Sites:

Old Lands (Kafr Sheikh): **2–6%** of land owned by women

New Lands (Noubariya): **20%** of land owned by women

78% of households reported **women's participation** in irrigation activities



The following are key findings from the three studies conducted in the Old and New Lands of Egypt.

Study 1: Women in landownership

- ICARDA researchers surveyed 202 women and 200 men, complemented by 120 semi-structured interviews, to identify patterns, opportunities, and constraints for ownership of land and other assets (houses, livestock, poultry, and gold).
- Women in the Old Lands identify gold as the most important asset for women, while women in the New Lands name land as most important. This can probably be attributed to familiarity with landownership for women in the New Lands. Since there are very few women who own land in the Old Lands, they are less likely to be familiar with the benefits of landownership for women and more likely to identify assets that women are traditionally familiar with and value, such as gold.
- Men identify gold as the most important asset for women in both communities, but significantly more men in the New Lands identify agricultural land and houses as important assets for women. This can again be attributed to the visibility and positive experiences of women owning agricultural land and houses in the New Lands.
- Sole and joint ownership are legally defined through names on a title, but people's perceptions of ownership and control may be socially defined. Women who hold sole title tend to identify their land as belonging to both themselves and their husbands, while men who hold sole title are less likely to identify their wives as co-owners. Women tend to control land jointly with their husbands, and in some cases even hand over the control of land they solely own to their spouses.
- Men are much more likely to identify a male relative than a spouse as a co-owner or joint controller. Male relatives such as brothers often co-inherit land.
- **Study findings point to land and homes as the most economically and socially valuable assets for men and women in Egypt. Livestock and gold are also certainly useful assets for women, especially because they can be sold easily for cash. Yet the study highlights the importance of implementing specific policies to optimize property ownership by women, even if they own non-land assets.**
- Gender equity goals can only be partially accomplished through legal measures and economic interventions. Consciousness-raising initiatives are as crucial as pro-women policy reforms and state actions.

- **In addition to enabling women to access and own land, it is important to strengthen and validate women's roles in agriculture. This is critical since women often see themselves, and are seen by others in the community, as helpers rather than farmers.**

Study 2: Irrigation and social norms

- Women participate in irrigation activities in 78% of the 402 households surveyed, suggesting that women are far more actively engaged in irrigation efforts in Egypt, and possibly in the wider MENA region, than is generally assumed.
- The recent diffusion of drip, sprinkler, and *tatweer* technologies has made irrigation more socially acceptable for women to perform, although some women were irrigating land long before these technologies became available.
- **Study findings identify landownership, educational attainment, access to training, and support from government, donors, and NGOs as factors that enable women to optimally undertake irrigation. These factors also enable women to participate meaningfully in public institutions related to irrigation, such as WUAs.**
- Irrigation roles can simultaneously be both burdensome and rewarding for women. While women are able to reap benefits from participating in WUAs, particularly in the early stages of resettlement, and gain access to resources and training, they also endure increased workloads and reputational damage. Social norms resist recognizing and validating women in their roles as irrigators.
- Changes in household structure and composition due to resettlement in new areas, including going from living in multigenerational extended families to living in nuclear families, can present challenges in the form of labor shortages but also opportunities in the form of more flexibility in gender norms.
- Participation in WUAs does not always optimize or validate women's roles in irrigation. Under certain circumstances, such as political unrest and erosion of institutional support, participation in WUAs can be of limited utility for both women and men.
- Desire and ability to participate in WUAs declines dramatically for both women and men when institutional support is withdrawn or eroded.

Study 3: Decent work, agency, and empowerment

- In Egypt, agriculture employs 43% of women versus 24% of men. Nevertheless, women's contributions are undervalued and they face difficulties earning decent wages and accumulating assets.
- ICARDA researchers studied barriers and opportunities faced by rural Egyptian women in the categories of agricultural work defined by the International Labour Organization: wage work, contributing family work, own account work (small-scale producers and subsistence farmers), membership in cooperatives and producer organizations, and as entrepreneurs who may also employ others.
- **Study findings confirm that there is a legal and social failure to recognize women as workers. Being categorized as “helpers” to male workers, instead of workers in their own right, harms women’s wellbeing and agency.**
- Among the women included in this study, daily wage workers have the lowest levels of agency and autonomy, while landowning entrepreneurs have the highest.
- Male agricultural workers in all categories fare badly at bargaining collectively to improve their working conditions, but women are unable to even access opportunities for such bargaining.
- **Recognizing women as workers, framing and enforcing equal pay legislation, and strengthening social protection for all workers are essential first steps to empower Egyptian women working in agriculture.**
- Informality, seasonality, irregularity, expensive production inputs, and land fragmentation (especially in the Old Lands) necessitate that rural women and men engage simultaneously in multiple livelihood activities with varying intensities. While workers may identify one activity as a mainstay, it is inadequate to classify workers under just one category in policy frameworks.
- Categorization is especially complicated for women given the blurriness of productive and reproductive spheres and other public and private dimensions of their lives. **More research needs to be conducted to develop frameworks that are reflective of women’s multiple, simultaneous livelihood activities.**
- Agricultural extension services have eroded deeply in recent years. The current annual budget of EGP 230,000 (USD 13,000) is, in the words of one official from the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, “not even enough to run ten motorcycles, let alone 350 extension centers around the country.” **Increasing funding and support for agricultural extension services, and hiring more female extension agents, will enable Egyptian women to benefit from working in agriculture.** If the government is unable to provide this, it may be worth exploring the possibilities of domestic and international civil society organizations, aid agencies, and private companies offering such services.

Research partners

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