

Shifting gender roles across Tunisia's rangelands



New and surprising insights of ICARDA study on livestock production identify steps to reduce the workload of rural women

In Tunisia, the traditional common rangelands governance system, which previously defined rangeland resting periods and access for user groups, has disappeared. This system used to help manage and preserve valuable resources, but has now been replaced by an “open access” regime which has resulted in uncontrolled cultivation and overgrazing. In response, [new policies](#) are being introduced to reverse these outcomes.

Recognizing a need to integrate gender more effectively within Tunisia's rangeland projects and policies, ICARDA brought together multiple government institutions, local communities, and international actors last year – under the auspices of the [CGIAR Research Program on Livestock](#) – to design practical research tools (interviews and questionnaire) to guide research activities.

To better understand the needs of men and women in rangeland management and their recommendations for change, a study was conducted that involved both genders but also prioritized the involvement of women who are often assumed not to participate in rangeland management and are therefore routinely excluded from consultations and rangeland programs.

Bridging a research gap

ICARDA, with its local partners, collected the views of 220 women and men in Medenine and Zaghounen, two regions in the South and North of Tunisia, respectively, to understand their views

and needs, and to explore gender roles, relations, constraints, and opportunities in livestock production and natural resource management.

The study is a step towards filling an important and persistent knowledge gap – as it looks at ways to bridge gender divides related to roles in livestock production, decision-making power, participation in public life and entrepreneurship, access to resources, innovation access and adoption, and adaptation to climate change.

Surprising findings

Findings reveal that gender roles in rangelands are determined by the size of landholdings, the socio-economic situation of the family, and connections with urban areas. Women perform tasks in agriculture that are traditionally considered “male,” including grazing livestock, if they are the head of a household, their husbands and male kin are absent, or the family is too poor to hire labor.

Women in both sites actively participate in livestock grazing. Furthermore, as a result of degradation, the shrinking size of rangelands due to the expansion of olive plantations, and high feed prices, women are also increasingly involved in collecting vegetation as an alternative source of feed.

Despite their participation in accessing resources from rangelands, women in both areas are severely limited from participating in rangeland and agricultural projects more generally. This inhibits women’s entrepreneurial capacities enormously. In Medinine, a female entrepreneur understood access to training and funding as a key factor to improve livelihoods:

“If only somebody had taught me about livestock production before starting the project I might have been able to avoid losing money and livestock. The bank gave me training before obtaining a loan, about how to create a project, but not about how to raise livestock. I might try again with a poultry project and this time hope to be better prepared and trained before applying for a loan.”

Findings also demonstrate that several natural resource management projects have generated jobs for men in recent years, for instance tree planting in Zaghuan to combat soil erosion. Women seldom benefit directly from these projects, and men are exclusively targeted for training in rangeland management – for example sowing forage crops and implementing resting periods when grazing is limited.

Desertification, drought and shifting gender roles

In both South and North Tunisia, women and men express concerns about the deterioration of rangelands due to desertification and drought. In addition to having to collect alternative feed from rangelands, women’s workloads have increased due to more time spent in livestock barns. Grazing time is reduced due to the heat, lack of shade (shed), and lack of water for livestock to drink from while grazing. As such, livestock are kept indoors for longer periods where women are responsible for cleaning the barns and feeding the animals.

The study generated findings not previously reported in the policy community: women are increasingly involved in grazing due to interdependent factors, including men's work off-farm, the reduced profitability of livestock rearing, and reduced interest of the younger generation in livestock production.

Next steps

As solutions, both men and women recommend water points for their livestock during grazing, reduced encroachment of orchards on rangelands areas, reduced price for feed, and efforts to halt desertification. Together, these efforts can, in turn, potentially increase the participation of men, especially youth, in livestock rearing and thus alleviate women's workloads while simultaneously conserving the natural resource base of Tunisia's rangelands.

These findings are being shared by ICARDA with the policy community as part of an inclusive consultation process related to the new pastoral code to improve rangeland management in Tunisia.

[Dina Najjar](#) is a Gender Scientist at ICARDA.