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Fragility to Resilience in Central  
and West Asia and North Africa

# **Gender Equality, Climate Change and Agriculture in the MENA region: Priorities and Possibilities**

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# Introduction: Biophysical Context



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- The MENA region is already the most water-stressed region in the world.
- Agricultural land is equally scarce and fragile.
- Temperatures in the region are projected to rise by 2 to 3 degrees Celsius and precipitation is projected to decline by 10 to 30 percent
  - crop yields could decrease by 30-60 percent
  - decline in groundwater replenishment and severely overexploited aquifers
  - agriculture as an industry is a major consumer of water

# Introduction: Social Context



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- The challenges for strengthening climate security and resilience in the MENA region have already been documented in detail to include:
  - High levels of conflict within and between countries, growing poverty, unemployment, loss of agricultural livelihoods, high levels of inequality leading to rising dissatisfaction with the status quo
- The effects and impact of climate change are locally specific and are experienced differently by different groups of people based on gender, age, race, disability, sexual orientation, class, and other social identities
  - Women more vulnerable to climate-change adversities.

# The MENA Paradox



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- According to the Global Gender Gap report, the gender gap is highest in the MENA region and “at the current relative pace, it would take an estimated 142.4 years to close”
- The region performs well on health and education but counterintuitively performs very poorly on economic and political participation: a phenomenon referred to as the “MENA paradox”
  - Only 18.5 percent of women participate in the labour force in the MENA region.



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# **What we know on gender and climate change in MENA?**

# 1. Migration as a livelihood strategy and women as de facto farmers



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- Women's contributions to agriculture in the MENA region have grown dramatically in recent decades
  - Migration - as a coping strategy in response to climate change, globalization, political instability, and other influences upon agriculture - is much more widely available to men than to women.
  - Entrenched familial and societal gender norms ensure that women remain almost solely responsible for homemaking and caregiving even as they are increasingly participating out of choice and necessity in the paid economy.

# Women as de facto farmers Cont'd



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- Women are contributing increasing amounts of labour to agriculture without experiencing a commensurate increase in access to resources or authority to make decisions about farming.
- Women remain largely de facto as opposed to de jure farmers in the MENA context with associated implications for their ability to adapt and build resilience to the effects upon agriculture of climate change. Public policies designed to enable women to play more agentic roles in agricultural decision-making and to gain greater access to financial resources, agricultural inputs and markets are urgently required to optimize agricultural productivity and food security, particularly in the context of worsening climate effects in the MENA region.

## 2. Feminization of Agriculture



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- Agriculture in the MENA region is becoming increasingly feminized
- Women tend to be employed in large numbers in MENA in the informal sector and in home-based work.
- Gender inequality persists in the MENA region because of an entrenched patriarchy from within the private domain of households, to communities, to a more systemic patriarchy sustained by the state and other key political and economic institutions



### 3. Women's “invisibility” in agriculture despite their active participation



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- Women's participation in agricultural labour has grown dramatically in the MENA region often in response to men and youth leaving the sector to pursue other livelihoods
- Meanwhile, land privatization and investment in irrigation, combined with the loss of common pastureland and drought in neighbouring areas, has fueled landlessness and migration from some regions and created a surge in agricultural labour in more productive areas.
- Women are also increasingly pushed into agriculture, partially due to a lack of other opportunities, or in situations of compulsion or necessity.

# Women's Invisibility Cont'd



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- Although agriculture is the largest employer of women in the MENA region, women's contribution to the sector remains largely undervalued, if not invisible.
  - Some estimates suggest that about 50 percent of women engaged in agrarian labour are either not counted at all in national surveys or classified as economically inactive
    - This is especially true for women who provide unpaid labour on family farms and are assumed to be (and may even see themselves as) economically inactive or, at most, as helpers to male farmers instead of farmers.

## 4. Marginalization and exclusion from land ownership



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- At 5 percent, the MENA region has one of the lowest documented rates of women's land ownership in the world (FAO 1999).
  - More recent surveys conducted in Egypt in 2014 reveal an even lower rate of 2 percent
- As in several MENA countries, by law, women are entitled to inherit only half of the natal property as their brothers, but ultimately most women do not receive even this limited share.
- Inability to access land rights at par with men renders unmarried, divorced, and widowed women particularly vulnerable to poverty and climate insecurity.

# Marginalization in Land Cont'd



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- Implications for women's ability to adapt and build resilience toward worsening climate effects are not always evident.
  - Without equitable access to land rights and ownership, women are often unable to make decisions about agriculture that would optimally enable them to adapt and thrive despite climate change.
  - Women's marginalization in land and property regimes in the MENA region also translates directly into weaker access to credit and capital, training, technology.

## 5. Weaker access to credit and capital, training, technology, and other inputs into agriculture



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- Women do not have adequate access to credit services, banking institutions, agricultural extension services, and training.
- Women also had weaker access than men to extension services and training in skills deemed masculine, such as irrigation and other drought-mitigation strategies.
- Women also have weaker access than men to markets for the goods they produce.

## 6. Wage Inequality in Agricultural Labour



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- Although women increasingly perform most of the agricultural work in the Global South, including in the MENA region, they are almost always paid less than men, experience more precarious working conditions, and have limited bargaining power
- The literature reveals that women systematically perform lower paid and manual tasks that are precarious and seasonal, while men perform more permanent, technologically sophisticated, and higher paying jobs.
- Almost all countries in the MENA region have framed national legislation against wage discrimination based on gender.
- Most countries in the region are also signatories to international treaties and guidelines (such as the ILO's decent work agenda) that stipulate equal pay for equal work, but major gaps remain in the implementation, enforcement and monitoring of such laws and policies, explaining the persistent gender wage gaps in many sectors of employment.

## 7. Women have fewer opportunities to organize, mobilize and form collectives



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- Many of the challenges and inequities women face in working in agriculture in MENA countries may have been addressed if women had opportunities to organize and mobilize for fairer wages and better working conditions. Farmers unions are rare in the MENA context, and where they exist, their primary focus appears to be on improving access to subsidized fertilizer and water rights, not on workers' rights, fair wages or decent working conditions.
  - Women in agricultural labour in MENA countries contend with erratic incomes, insecure work, lean seasons, work-related injuries, lack of health insurance and unaffordable or unavailable childcare. Increased mechanization of harvesting is leading to job losses for women.

## 8. Women have weaker access to policy and decision-making structures



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- Women having much weaker access than men to governance, policy, and decision-making spaces.
- The limited existing research on the topic points to institutional support from NGOs and international or intergovernmental agricultural organizations, gender-based quotas or targets, and closer attention and responsiveness to women's domestic responsibilities.
- More research aimed at understanding how to enable women to participate optimally in public institutions in agriculture in the context of specific countries in the MENA region should be a priority.



# What we do not know



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## **1. How best to enable women to gain legal and social recognition as farmers**

- Advancing legal recognition via gender-disaggregated data collection and inclusion and analysis of formal and informal work.

## **2. How to advocate for reform of male-biased inheritance practices and for gender equality in land ownership**

- The question of how best to advocate for gender equality in land ownership in MENA is complicated by findings which suggest that policy interventions in the absence of wider political consciousness and awareness about gender equality are inadequate.
- Since inheritance practices remain so male-biased it is also important to ask from a more practical perspective if assets other than land can also enable women in agriculture to build economic security and resilience to the effects of climate change.

### 3. Research on women's ownership of non-land assets



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- Though there have been a few studies addressing women's ownership of land assets.
- Because these assets are highly liquefiable, it is important for women to have control over their sale and use.
- Future research on gender and asset ownership should also consider various forms of sole and joint ownership [Cognizant that joint does not mean equal].

## 4. How to enable women to access training in irrigation and other skills deemed “masculine”



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- The existing scholarly and practitioner literature on women's participation in irrigation in MENA countries suggest that although women participate quite actively in irrigation and water management, their contributions are poorly understood and undervalued.
  - Detailed and comparative research in specific countries and local contexts in MENA is important for ensuring equitable participation of women in irrigation.
  - Although women's invisibility in irrigation may be a consequence of their lower levels of land ownership and social status and stronger association with the domestic sphere, it may also be a consequence of the continuing association of irrigation with masculinity.
- Findings from rural Tunisia in rangelands suggest that women are often unable to access innovations which may mitigate the effects of climate change at par with men. Skills and training related to drought and irrigation, for example, were targeted almost exclusively to men.

## 5. How to mechanize the agricultural sector responsibly



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- Mechanization will be heavily influenced by economic and social realities of the local context and will initially affect medium- and low-skilled workers the most, among whom women are the majority,.
- The mechanization of commercial agricultural enterprises in Egypt and Morocco have raised concerns that women are more likely than men to lose work because of mechanization.
- Research and public policy should anticipate mechanization displacing wage work and train those affected in other skills.

## 6. How to create and optimize livelihoods complementary with agriculture



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- More research is needed to understand how women might optimize incomes from agriculture as well as nonagricultural economic activities.
  - NGOs and other civil society organizations may be well placed to assist women in business training and marketing their goods.
- Very little is known about longer-term outcomes upon women's lives from their growing participation in commercial farming.
  - No research available to help us understand how women who participate actively in commercial agriculture in their youth fare as they get older and become less productive.
  - There is no existing research on their needs, priorities, or on their ability to transition into less physically demanding sectors of employment or into retirement.

## 7. How best to organize and mobilize for rights, resources, entitlements (cooperatives, membership-based organizations, unions, etc)



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- The existing cooperatives are often not well-organized or well run. Members have limited access to training, social protection and benefits via cooperatives, but they were able to access markets and export licenses through their participation in cooperatives.
- Women's only cooperatives in other settings have been known to empower women on social, economic and political fronts.
- Increased engagement of unions as organizations that lobby for improved wages and working conditions for workers is also important.

## 8. Research on refugees in agriculture in MENA



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- Four of the top ten refugee host countries in the world are in the MENA region: Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iran.
- It is well known that large numbers of refugees living in rural areas in MENA are working in agriculture, both as formal and informal wage labour.
  - Given the continued political strife and turmoil in the region and the scale of migration within and between MENA countries, research on this topic should be considered an urgent priority.

## 9. Better understanding of youth perceptions and interests in agriculture



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- The existing research on agricultural labour in MENA confirms that most of those between the ages of 15 and 24 only participate in agriculture when they have no other viable livelihood options.
- Research and responsive policies aimed at revalorizing agricultural labour to render it more compatible with contemporary aspirations of youth are urgently needed.
- Given the added stress that climate change places upon agricultural systems and productivity, the sector can ill afford to lose out on the labour, energy, enthusiasm, and creativity that youth can bring to it.





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