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Shedding light on women's wages and working conditions in the agricultural sector in Morocco

Submitted by Martina Antonucci on October 11, 2016



Female workers in a farm in Morocco. Photo credit: Ali Janah

It is now a well acknowledged fact that women in developing countries make big contributions to agriculture; however, they are still not adequately recognized and compensated for their work.

A recent study by the CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems examines **gender inequalities** within the agricultural sector in Morocco. The project sheds light on issues that have so far barely been addressed by the research community, which has sustained focus on landed households for their ability to test and adopt agricultural innovations.

The study targets **landless women and men** that sell their labour for commercial and family farms practicing intensified agriculture. The authors quantify the **gender wage gap** and explore the **working conditions** within the agricultural sector in Saiss Morocco; a topic which is understudied and undermined in theoretical and applied assessment literature in the Middle East and North Africa region, albeit being very important for the landless poor who only have their labour to offer.

Due to recent governmental investments into the agricultural sector, many communities of the Saiss region experienced an **expansion and intensification** of agriculture. In response to the increased demand for agricultural labour, unemployed and landless woman and men migrated from less favourable areas to these communities, looking for waged work. More than half of the people engaged as labourers in commercial and intensive family-owned farms jobs are women.

According to the World Bank, the percentage of all employed women and men working in the agricultural sector in Morocco changed significantly between 1990-2011, such that:

In 1990, only 3 percent of all employed women and 4 percent of all employed men worked in agriculture

By 2009, those figures burgeoned to 59 percent of all employed women and 34 percent of all employed men

In 2011, there was a further increase to 61 percent and 32 percent of all employed women and men respectively.

This represents a significant **shift to waged rather than subsistence agricultural work** in light of agricultural intensification. As such, addressing the gender wage gap and working conditions of rural women is of national importance.

For the study, qualitative and quantitative data about wages and working conditions of male and female labourers in intensive farms were collected through surveys, semi-structured interviews and gender-segregated focus groups. The aim was to compare the wages of male and female workers in big commercial farms as well as in intensive family-led farms. The key findings are reported as follows:

1. Women and men are hired for performing different tasks

The findings showed that different tasks were assigned to women and men. Generally, women were mainly employed for tasks that were perceived '**easy to learn**' and that did not require much physical strength, despite being strenuous. Weeding, thinning, grafting, packing and sorting onions were the tasks mostly assigned to women. On the contrary, tasks that required more **physical strength**, the **use of tools** or **giving orders** were perceived as men's tasks. As a consequence, planting, seeding, pruning, irrigation, fertilizing and supervision of labourers were assigned mainly to men.

2. There is a gender wage gap, which varies depending on tasks, crop types and farms

The findings show that, on average, men received a daily wage that is 17 percent higher than that of women. This could be attributed to women's **lower bargaining power** and their higher willingness to perform lower paid tasks. However, variations in the gender wage gap were found for different crops, farm types and the tasks

performed.

In **smaller farms** labourers were generally paid more than in commercial farms, but the **gender wage gap was larger**. For the same task, women in smaller farms were paid 20 dirhams (US\$ 2.04) less than men, while in commercial farms the gap was 10 dirhams (US\$ 1.02).

On average, the skill-intensive tasks performed by men were paid 25% more than the skill-intensive tasks covered mainly by women. However, even when women and men performed the same tasks or when the intensity of the work was the same, women were very often paid less. For instance, the authors report that for harvesting olives or for transporting onions from the nursery, men received 70 dirhams (US\$ 7.15) whereas women received 50 dirhams (US\$ 5.11).

As stated previously, the wages also varied depending on the type of crops produced. Female and male labourers engaged in the production of onions and potatoes were paid the most, while those working with fruit received lower wages. Wheat presented the largest crop-specific wage gap between male and female labourers, with men being paid from 3 to 10 times more than women.



Women harvesting onions while a man supervises their work. Photo credit: Dina Najjar

3. Social acceptability of women's paid work varies in different communities

The study showed that in less developed and less agriculturally productive areas, communities tend to be more conservative and female labourers encountered more limitations. In contrast, communities where agriculture is intensified, the need for labour force led to an **evolved perception** of the engagement of women in agriculture, which became more accepted. This led to a migration of women from underdeveloped areas to more productive ones in order to find waged work.

4. For both men and women, the employment at the agricultural wage sector represented an insecure livelihood strategy

Both female and male respondents claimed that agricultural work was exhausting, unstable and insufficiently paid. Employment within the agricultural sector was often considered an option of last resort. With regards to working conditions, the minority of the labourers interviewed had access to benefits like health care and pension. In fact, most of the workers, both women and men, were hired informally, with **no labour rights** safeguarded.

Since the tasks normally assigned to women were mostly required during the peak season, they were more likely to be hired occasionally compared to men, making them more vulnerable towards financial problems, particularly during winter seasons. While men had better access to other non-agricultural works, women had **less opportunities** to improve their livelihoods outside the agricultural sector.

Recommendations

The study points out that, as has been found elsewhere, in commercialized farming gender ideologies, the lower bargaining power of women and their lack of alternative work options makes them disadvantaged in terms of wage received, even when they perform the same tasks as men. Although legislation that assures gender equality already exists in Morocco, gender discrimination is still significant within the agricultural sector in the Saiss region. **Enforcing the existing legislation** to ensure that women benefit equitably from their work is therefore critical to improve the condition and livelihoods of women.

Additionally, promoting strategies that can **change the perception** of agricultural work as an occupation of last resort is needed to achieve broader agricultural and economic development in Morocco. As such, responding to the most urgent requests by labourers, like the expansion of social protection and formalization of work in terms of access to a stable income and medical insurance, can significantly improve their condition and revalorize agricultural work.

For more information about this study please contact the main author Dina Najjar at D.Najjar@cgiar.org.

About the author

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