



Economic Inclusion and social protection to reduce poverty Fostering gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls in the wake of COVID-19

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The issue

As shown by emerging evidence on the COVID-19 pandemic, women are expected to be hit harder by the economic impacts of the crisis as they generally earn less, save less and hold more insecure jobs in the informal economy. In the Arab region, the pandemic is expected to result in the loss of 1.7 million jobs, most of which in sectors dominated by women (UNESCWA 2020).

In the agriculture sector, the pandemic poses a serious threat to both rural women and men's livelihoods, by hindering their engagement in economic activities as farmers, processors and traders. However, rural women's unequal access to assets, technologies and services – which in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region is still profound – make them particularly vulnerable to economic downturns. Rural women in the region also tend to have very limited access to social protection programmes that can help them cope in times of crises.

In the context of the pandemic, the increased demand for care work is deepening existing inequalities in the gender division of labor, adding to women's excessive burden of unpaid care and household responsibilities. As documented in the case of other epidemics, young women and girls will be particularly affected, as they are more likely than their male counterparts to be pulled out of school and the labour market to compensate for increased care and domestic work. As a result of households' economic distress and food insecurity, girls may also face an increased risk of forced or early marriage.

At a time in which many households are forced to switch to less nutritious food or reduce the number of meals eaten daily, discriminatory gender norms – which prioritize men and boys' well-being – put women and girls at higher risk of food insecurity and malnutrition. With the imposed social isolation, women and girls' vulnerability to domestic violence – currently experienced by 37 percent of women in Arab countries – is also expected to increase (UN ESCWA and UN Women, 2020), while recourses and protection mechanisms, especially in rural areas, continue to be absent or unable to absorb the surge in cases.

The impact of the crisis on women who live in the conflict-affected countries of the region is also of particular concern. In these contexts, women and girls have had their access to livelihoods and essential services severely restricted even before the COVID-19 outbreak and may find themselves unable to cope with the health and economic impacts of the current crisis.

The programme

The Programme aims to mitigate the gender-differentiated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, while at the same time paving the way to reducing persisting gender inequalities and accelerating the social and economic empowerment of rural women and girls in the NENA region.

Budget

USD 1.5 million

Time frame

October 2020–January 2023

SDGs



Related FAO policy notes on COVID-19

- ▶ [Gendered Impacts of Covid-19 and Equitable Policy Responses in Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition](#)



In particular, the programme will:

- 1 Support the undertaking of rapid gender analyses and vulnerability assessments, to monitor how the pandemic has impacted on the livelihoods of rural women and men (of different age and socio-economic groups). The evidence generated, at country and regional level, will be disseminated to support the design and implementation of gender-responsive recovery and response policies and programmes.
- 2 Promote rural women's economic empowerment and resilience by enhancing their access to productive resources and agricultural support services. Inclusive financial services will be essential to mitigate the liquidity crisis faced by women smallholder farmers and women-led enterprise. Through this action, the programme will strengthen the capacities of rural organizations and service providers (both public and private) to operate in a gender-responsive manner and provide a portfolio of services that better respond to rural women's needs and priorities.
- 3 Enhance women's voice and leadership in rural institutions and relevant decision-making processes, to ensure that COVID-19 recovery and response mechanisms reflect their interests and demands, including in relation to protection from gender-based violence and domestic abuse. The programme will advocate for and facilitate women's participation at all levels, by partnering with local and regional women's organizations that have been on the front line of response since the outbreak of the pandemic.
- 4 Improve rural women and girls' access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). From the onset of the pandemic, ICTs proved essential to disseminate vital health information, particularly to isolated rural areas. Reducing the digital gender gap is an effective strategy to enhance women's and girls' access to information, agricultural support services and markets, and to overcome some of the mobility, time and security constraints rural women face as a result of the COVID-19 containment measures.
- 5 Expand the coverage of social protection programmes to rural women and girls, by facilitating the design and implementation of targeted measures, tailored to the needs of women smallholder farmers and micro and small agripreneurs in the informal sector.

Expected results

- 1 COVID-19 response policies and programmes in the region are based on sound gender analyses and respond effectively to the specific roles, needs and priorities of rural women and girls.

- 2 Increased rural women's resilience to the COVID-19 pandemic through improved access to gender-responsive agricultural support services, rural finance and social protection programmes.
- 3 Rural women's voice and influence enhanced in rural institutions and in relevant decision-making processes related to COVID-19 recovery and response.
- 4 Rural women's improved access to ICTs and ICTs-based agricultural support services.

Programme links

The programme is in line with the United Nations (UN) Decade for Family Farming Regional Action Plan for the Near East & North Africa region, the Arab Rural Women's Economic Empowerment Programme currently being implemented with the Arab Women's Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations – World Food Programme Regional Joint Action Plan. It will also contribute to the Regional Initiative on Small Scale Family Farming and the Regional Programme on "Implementing the 2030 Agenda on Water, Efficiency, Productivity and Sustainability in the NENA countries". Ultimately, the programme contribute to the achievement of the FAO Gender Equality Policy's objectives.

Partnerships

This programme will be implemented in collaboration with the members of the Issue-based Coalition on Gender Equality in the Arab Region, in particular with the WFP Regional Bureau for Middle East and UN Women Regional Office for the Arab States. Other key partners include the Arab Women's Organization, the Arab International Women's Forum, CARE International along with FAO country offices, non-governmental organizations and national producer and civil society organizations.

Country focus

Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, West Bank and Gaza Strip, Yemen

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