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**Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Agrifood
Systems in the Near East and North Africa region**

Executive Summary

Closing gender gaps in agrifood systems enhances the well-being of women, households, and communities, by reducing poverty and food insecurity, boosting economic growth, and strengthening resilience. Despite the progress achieved by many countries in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region, profound gender inequalities persist in the access to assets, inputs, resources, and technologies as well as with regards to women's participation and leadership in some of the relevant decision-making processes.

This information note provides an overview of the gender dynamics that characterize agrifood systems in the region, highlighting the main gaps that prevent women from contributing to and benefitting equally from rural transformation and agrifood systems development. Other dimensions, such as age, residency status, disability, and socio-economic conditions, intersect with gender to create marginalization and vulnerability. Across the NENA region, younger women, widows, female heads of households, women among refugees and internally displaced people, and women living with disabilities, are often at higher risk of poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition, especially in countries affected by protracted crises.

By providing an update on FAO's work on gender equality and women's empowerment, the note outlines promising approaches and interventions that have the potential to be replicated and scaled up. Finally, the note proposes a set of actions for the way forward, emphasizing the need for integrated and systemic approaches to tackle the underlying causes of gender inequalities, rooted in discriminatory social norms and practices, and perpetuated by genderblind institutions, legal and policy frameworks.

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I. Women's role in agrifood systems in the NENA region

1. Compared to other regions in the world, women's employment in the agrifood systems is relatively low in the NENA region. The percentage of women employed in both the agricultural and non-agricultural components of agrifood systems was estimated at 20 percent in 2019, compared to a global average of 36 percent.¹ Overall, women's participation in the labour force remains low in the NENA region, standing at around 19 percent compared to a male labour force participation of 77 percent and a world average of 49 percent.² Despite some progress achieved in the past decades, women in some countries in the region – especially rural and younger women – still face significant structural barriers to entering and remaining in the labour force.³
2. Agricultural production remains a key source of livelihood and employment for women in the region. In 2019, almost a quarter of employed women worked in the agriculture sector, compared to only 17.6 percent of employed men⁴. The differences among countries are significant. Agriculture provides a higher share of female than male employment in Sudan, Yemen, Egypt, Morocco, and Palestine. Particularly striking are the cases of Morocco, Sudan, and Yemen, where the share of total employment from agriculture for women was about 25, 18, and 16 percentage points higher than for men. Women's participation in agricultural labour has grown in many countries in the region in response to men and youth leaving the sector to pursue other employment opportunities or as a result of conflicts. Trends in the “feminization of agriculture” have been reported in Algeria, Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, and Egypt⁵.
3. As women mainly work as unpaid contributing family members rather than farmers or agripreneurs in their own account, their actual contribution to the agrifood sector is often underestimated by official statistics. However, recent country gender assessments and gender analyses undertaken by FAO across the region clearly show that women play multiple and critical roles in agrifood systems, as producers, processors, and retailers⁶. These studies also show that women workers and women-led cooperatives, associations, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly active in the upstream and midstream of many agrifood value chains, such as dairy, fruits, etc. Across the region, rural women also play a vital, yet unrecognized role in the use and management of natural resources, such as land, water, drylands, and forests, especially when related to small-scale agriculture and family farming.
4. As primarily responsible for “reproductive work” (i.e. child care, food preparation and cleaning, etc.), women also provide an essential contribution to the food security and nutrition of households and communities, particularly in rural areas where social services are often unavailable. Rural women perform crucial but overlooked agricultural tasks like backyard poultry farming, kitchen gardens, and home-based dairy processing, vital for household nutrition and well-being.

II. Persisting gender gaps in the agrifood systems in the NENA region

5. Despite the progress achieved in the past decades, women's role and potential in agrifood systems are still constrained by severe discriminations that limit their access to assets, resources, entitlements, and opportunities.

¹ FAO. 2023. The status of women in agrifood systems. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc5343en>

² World Bank, based on modeled ILO estimates retrieved from International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database (25/06/2023): <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?end=2019&locations=ZQ-1W&start=2019&view=bar>

³ World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2022. Geneva: International Labour Office, 2022.

⁴ World Bank. based on modeled ILO estimates retrieved from International Labour Organization. ILOSTAT database. Accessed on 28/03/2021. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS>

⁵ Baruah, B, and Najjar, D. 2022. *Gender Equality, Climate Change and Agriculture in the MENA region: Priorities and Possibilities*. Beirut, Lebanon: International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA).

⁶ Country Gender Assessments of the agriculture and rural sector are available for several countries in the region at <https://www.fao.org/gender/resources/country-assessments/en>.

6. Although sex-disaggregated data are fragmented, it is estimated that regionally women own less than 7 percent of agricultural land and that female landowners make up as little as 5 percent of property owners⁷. This is problematic as secure land rights are positively associated with greater adoption of technologies, better resilience capacity, enhanced decision-making, increase in investments, and higher levels of agricultural productivity and income⁸. Lack of secure land tenure rights limits women's access to other productive resources (including water) and services (such as credit and other financial services for which land is often required as collateral). It also limits its membership to rural and producer organizations, which are instrumental to accessing rural advisory services and market opportunities.
7. The insufficient responsiveness of policies and institutions operating in the agrifood systems also contributes to limiting women's access to agricultural support services (being it rural advisory, financial or business development). Membership policies of producer organizations are not always inclusive, while service providers often fail to respond to women's specific needs and demands. This leads to substantial gaps in access to information, skills, technologies, and practices that contribute to explaining why women tend to remain concentrated in the informal sector and in the low-skilled and less lucrative nodes of agrifood value chains.
8. While progress was achieved in promoting women's representation in political institutions, equal participation and leadership are far from being achieved in the NENA region. Based on the 2023 Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum, the region shows a low performance in terms of women's political empowerment⁹. Women's limited participation and leadership in relevant decision-making processes prevent them from shaping policies, investments, and strategies that are responsive to their needs and interests. This is evident in rural institutions, organizations, and governance mechanisms, where women are often unequally represented.
9. Gender gaps in access to assets, resources, and advisory services also limit women's exposure and uptake of green, water-saving, and climate-smart practices and technologies. This does not only undermine their adaptive capacities and resilience to climate change or climate-induced disasters; it also hinders national and regional efforts for greening agriculture and reducing environmental degradation.
10. The rise of temperatures in a region that is already the most water-scarce in the world is widening social and economic inequalities and endangering people's access to food and water resources in a way that is not gender-neutral. Yet, women's participation and leadership in climate action remains limited and gender concerns are still only partially addressed in national adaptation plans (NAPs) and climate-related strategies.
11. Climate change is a factor increasingly contributing to rural out-migration. A study of five NENA countries estimates that extreme climate events account for up to 20 percent of migration¹⁰, which is expected to increase with the worsening climatic conditions. This again has gender implications, as migration patterns differ for women and men. Women whose husbands, brothers and fathers have migrated due to economic or climatic reasons may face additional work burden, economic vulnerability, food insecurity or even increased mortality risks.¹¹

⁷ Popal, F. and Langley, B. 2021. *Women's Leadership and Economic Empowerment. A solution for the Economies of the Middle East and North Africa*. George W. Bush Institution and Centre for International Private Enterprise. Accessed online at: http://gwbcenter.imgix.net/Publications/Resources/gwbi-2021_CIPE_paper.pdf.

⁸ FAO. 2023. *The status of women in agrifood systems*, Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc5343en>

⁹ World Economic Forum. 2023. *Global Gender Gap Report 2023*.

https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ FAO. 2023. *The status of women in agrifood systems*, Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc5343en>

12. Digitalization holds the potential to facilitate women's access to information, services, and market opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the use of digital solutions in the agrifood sector, creating new opportunities for the economic inclusion of small-scale value chain actors. However, digital inclusion remains a challenge in the NENA region, where the rural and gender divide intersect to create multiple layers of marginalization. Despite recent achievements, 25 million women do not own mobile phones and around 60 million women do not use mobile internet¹². Many factors contribute to maintaining this digital gender gap, including rural women's and girls' unequal access to quality education, digital literacy programmes, and financial resources. In some areas, rigid gender norms and persisting legal barriers also limit women's access to technology and innovation.
13. Conflict and protracted crises remain the main drivers of food insecurity in the NENA region. Hunger in conflict-affected countries has been much higher than in non-conflict countries: in 2020, the prevalence of undernourishment in conflict-affected countries was 34.7 percent, more than six times as high as in non-conflict countries¹³. While sex-disaggregated data from conflict-affected countries are scarce and fragmented, women and girls are likely to be particularly vulnerable to food insecurity and malnutrition. Data show that food insecurity affects women more than men in every region of the world because of persisting gender inequalities and discrimination, with women living in rural areas even more likely to be food insecure¹⁴. For example, despite the declining trends in the past two decades, anemia continued to remain a severe public health problem in the low-income economies of the region, with Yemen reporting the highest prevalence of anemia in 2020, affecting 61.5 percent of women of reproductive age.¹⁵
14. Men, women, boys, and girls often experience emergencies and crises differently due to their distinct roles, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities within societies. The situation is even more complex in the NENA region, where populations are increasingly affected by the compounded impacts of shocks and crises of different nature (conflicts, natural disasters, economic downturns, political instability) that disrupt gender roles and social norms in ways that are different and difficult to generalize.
15. Women's unpaid care work becomes even more critical in times of crises, because it compensates for the interruption or the reduction of public services, as clearly documented by the impact assessments of the COVID-19 pandemic and in contexts affected by protracted conflicts and natural disasters¹⁶. Women's excessive work burden directly impacts their ability to engage in paid work, education, and public life. Women and girls living in remote rural areas or conflict-affected areas, where services and infrastructure are lacking or disrupted, face a greater risk of time poverty.
16. Women in conflict-affected areas and in emergency situations, refugees and internally displaced are particularly vulnerable to the risk of violence, which further undermines their resilience capacity. Rural women often suffer from a double layer of marginalization, as health and protection services are often lacking in rural areas. Moreover, GBV prevention and mitigation

¹² GSMA, *The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023*. https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2023.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=download-button&utm_campaign=gender-gap-2023

¹³ FAO. 2021. *Near East and North Africa – Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021: Statistics and trends*, Cairo. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7495en>

¹⁴ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2023. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023. Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural–urban continuum*, Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc3017en>

¹⁵ FAO. 2021. *Near East and North Africa – Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021: Statistics and trends*, Cairo. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7495en>

¹⁶ See for example: FAO and WFP. 2022. *The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality and food security in the Arab region with a focus on the Sudan and Iraq*, Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7852en>

are often overlooked in policies and programmes in the agriculture and rural sector, while poverty and food insecurity are important drivers of gender-based violence and harmful practices, such as early marriage and economic violence.

III. FAO's work on gender equality at regional and country levels

17. In alignment with the FAO Strategic Framework, the Regional Priorities, and the objectives of the Policy on Gender Equality 2020-2030, FAO's key areas of work on gender equality and women's empowerment in the NENA region focus on:

- a strengthening women's role in agrifood systems through improved access to and control over assets, resources, skills development opportunities, and services;
- b promoting equitable access to climate-smart, water-saving and environmentally friendly practices, technologies and services;
- c enhancing women's equitable participation and decision-making in relevant rural organizations, institutions and governance mechanisms; and
- d restoring women's livelihoods and improving their resilience capacities to cope with the impact of multiple shocks and crises, including conflicts and natural disasters.

18. FAO also developed a Regional Gender Strategy and Action Plan to sharpen the focus of its programme of work on gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) in NENA. The Strategy also aims to facilitate the reporting of the progress achieved to Members.

19. As shown in Figure 1, FAO works on its priority areas through multiple functions and types of interventions, which build on its comparative advantages in the NENA region.



Figure 1. FAO's priority areas of work and functions in the NENA region.

20. Since the last FAO regional Conference, FAO has continued to invest in the generation and dissemination of data and knowledge on the gender gaps that affect the agrifood systems in the region and the promising solutions to overcome them. In close collaboration with national institutions, comprehensive Country Gender Assessments of the Agriculture and Rural Sectors were undertaken for Egypt, Lebanon, the Sudan, Tunisia, Palestine, Morocco, and Mauritania, to provide a solid evidence base for gender-responsive policy and programme development in these critical sectors. Several thematic studies contributed to generating knowledge on gender equality in specific areas of FAO's work in the region, such as sustainable water management (in Egypt and Palestine) and resilience to multiple shocks and crises (in Iraq, the Sudan, and Yemen).

21. FAO is also providing technical support to countries in reporting on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 5.a.2, which assesses the extent to which national laws protect women's rights to land. As of May 2023, four countries, namely Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Qatar, submitted their official reports while Morocco and the United Arab Emirates are actively

engaged in the assessment process. The analysis of the data collected through the reporting exercise provides important information that can guide efforts to improve national legal and policy frameworks related to women's land rights.

22. FAO has also continued to develop guidance materials and tools that can support gender-responsive actions and interventions by a wide range of stakeholders operating in agrifood systems. FAO's learning package on gender-sensitive value chain development was made available in Arabic to facilitate its uptake by local partners, and new tools have been developed to support gender-responsive business models and service provision in agrifood value chains¹⁷.
23. This knowledge is critical to orient the implementation of FAO's project portfolio in the region and ensure that it contributes to the above-mentioned priorities, in alignment with national provisions and strategies on GEWE. While gender equality concerns are mainstreamed across all its interventions, FAO has initiated and implemented an increasing number of women-targeted and gender-focused interventions that led to significant results in terms of rural women's increased access to resources and income-generating activities (such as in the case of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Tunisia, and Yemen) and improved performance of women's cooperatives and associations in the agrifood sector (for example, in Lebanon, Oman, Palestine and Saudi Arabia).
24. Women's equitable adoption of climate-smart, water-saving, and environmentally friendly technologies and practices is the entry point for several interventions, developed with the clear purpose of empowering women as agents of change for climate adaptation and sustainable water management (for example, in the case of Egypt and Iraq). FAO's programmes in crisis-affected countries pay specific attention to reinforcing women's and girls' resilience capacities by addressing gender-differentiated vulnerabilities, while also supporting the transformation of unequal gender roles (for example, facilitating women's participation in the labour force), such as in the case of programmes in Palestine, the Sudan and Yemen.
25. Group-based and participatory approaches, such as FAO Farmers Field Schools, Farm Business Schools, and Cooperative Business Schools, have proved successful in many countries to enhance the outreach to rural women and facilitate their access to information, knowledge, and good agricultural practices as well as business skills. Furthermore, these approaches showed promising results in building women's agency and self-confidence, in challenging harmful gender stereotypes, and in promoting more equitable gender dynamics, both at the household and community level.
26. Building on these promising results, FAO has accelerated its efforts to adopt Gender-Transformative Approaches (GTAs) (i.e. approaches that explicitly aim to challenge discriminatory social norms, attitudes, and behaviours that are the root causes of gender inequalities) across its project portfolio, such as the Dimitra Clubs (introduced in Mauritania and the Syrian Arab Republic) or the Economic and Social Empowerment (EASE) curriculum (also piloted in the Syrian Arab Republic).
27. FAO has enhanced its efforts to raise awareness and build capacities of different stakeholders, both at the national and regional levels. In November 2022, 46 government officials and FAO technical officers participated in a three-day regional gender training "Towards gender-transformative interventions in the agricultural and rural sector in the NENA region", which proved very successful not only in disseminating tools, good practices, and lessons learned on gender-transformative programming but also to strengthen the regional community of practice working on gender and agrifood systems. The capacity development programme has since then been adapted and replicated to respond to national requests for training in Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen.
28. Enhanced awareness and capacities have facilitated policy dialogue and engagement on GEWE. In Morocco, for example, FAO supports the Ministry of Agriculture to establish an

¹⁷ All gender studies and publication are available at: <https://www.fao.org/neareast/action-areas/gender/en/>

information system for coordinated planning, monitoring, and reporting on the gender-related results of the Green Generation Strategy. Similarly, in Palestine, FAO assists the Ministry of Agriculture in undertaking a gender audit to assess and improve the institutionalization of gender mainstreaming.

IV. Conclusion and way forward

29. To close the gender gaps that affect agrifood systems in the region and achieve the commitments of the 2030 Agenda, it is fundamental to promote integrated, systemic, and transformative interventions that explicitly address the harmful practices, unequal social norms, and gender-blind discriminatory policy frameworks that create inequality.
30. Priority areas of interventions for FAO and Member Nations, in partnership with relevant regional and national partners and stakeholders, include:
 - a) supporting the generation and dissemination of data and statistics, disaggregated by sex, age, and other relevant social dimensions, to inform evidence-based policies and programmes;
 - b) encouraging the formulation and implementation of policy and legal frameworks that respect, promote and fulfil women's equal rights to and control over assets (land in particular), productive and natural resources, agricultural inputs, and technologies. Commitments to collect data and report on SDG indicators 5.a.2 and 5.a.1, which respectively assess women's land rights in the law and track the gender patterns of landownership among agricultural populations, can greatly support countries in this endeavour;
 - c) implementing programmes and investment strategies that enable gender and age-responsive rural transformation, by ensuring inclusive agricultural support services (rural advisory, financial, and business development) and by providing incentives to women's decent employment and entrepreneurship in agrifood systems;
 - d) facilitating the integration of gender dimensions and priorities into NAPs and climate-related programmes, to mitigate the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change and ensure women's meaningful participation in agrifood systems;
 - e) ensuring that gender dimensions are integrated into the needs assessments and response plans for crisis-affected countries, and that resilience-building efforts takes into consideration the impacts that multiple shocks and crises have on different population groups; and
 - f) supporting the adoption of GTAs that focus on increasing skills, capacities, and resilience of rural populations relying on agrifood systems for their livelihoods, while explicitly challenging unequal power relations through household and community mobilization.