

# Mediterranean Women in Rural and Agricultural Communities: Double Jeopardy, Multiple Opportunities

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In the Mediterranean Region, the gaps between countries in natural, financial and human resources are significant, but in considering the economic, socio-political and environmental challenges the region must overcome, a common destiny emerges in which women are a lever for development, provided that their potential is acknowledged and released and that the struggle against gender inequality occupies a central position in public and private policy. Although participation in economic, social and political spheres remains unequal insofar as gender on a planetary scale, it is more intense in the Mediterranean Region, particularly in the south Mediterranean. Women from rural and agricultural areas, as everywhere, often have the lowest-quality jobs and are less well paid (if at all). In addition, they must deal with compounded difficulties, inequalities and discriminations. First of all, they experience the effects of the marginalization of rural areas (limited access to services, training, socio-medical and cultural facilities, etc.). Moreover, depending on the country, they may also be victims of gender-related discrimination ranging from sociocultural pressure – fostering the isolation of women relegated to the domestic space – to legalized discrimination, namely with regards to inheritance and access to real estate. In addition to these factors, there are constraints of an environmental order that make these women particularly vulnerable. Although they are the object of compounded inequalities and discriminations and bear a

“double penalty,” they remain a key element for the stabilization of territories. They are at the heart of the resilience of rural societies and constitute an element of response to Mediterranean challenges insofar as food security and the preservation of rural ecosystems. Whether in the struggle against the waste of natural and human resources or the creation of sustainable employment, the participation of women should be fostered and greater investment should be made in building their capacities.

## Food Security and Climate Change

The south Mediterranean is characterized by both its significant arid and semi-arid areas with low agricultural potential and its demographic growth. Although climate constraints have always marked rural societies, which have had to develop agricultural production systems capable of absorbing shocks to a greater or lesser degree in order to survive, this “resilience” is now being called into question. The increased temperatures, the decreased precipitation and its irregularity, desertification and declining soil quality now have a serious impact on agricultural activity, at a time when the region requires greater and better production. In the North Africa/Middle East (MENA) region, the population went from 139 million inhabitants in 1961 to 496 million in 2011, making meeting food needs the region’s primary challenge.

Despite significant progress in agricultural production, the countries in this area rely heavily on international markets to meet their needs. The five North African countries alone have accounted for a total annual average of 20 to 25 billion in agricultural imports since 2010.<sup>1</sup> The recent rise in agricultural raw

<sup>1</sup> *Le système agricole et alimentaire de la région Afrique du Nord – Moyen-Orient à l’horizon 2050 : projections de tendance et analyse de sensibilité*. Final report of the study carried out for Pluriagri, Paris and Rennes: INRA-DEPE & INRA-SAE2, 133 pp.

materials prices, the decrease in natural resources and climate change, which directly affects the state of crops, render these countries even more vulnerable. In this context, the role of small-scale farming has strategic importance and small-scale farms have become leading actors in the resilience of food and agriculture systems. In the MENA region, nearly 80% of agricultural production comes from small-scale farming, but the work of women is underestimated because it is often unpaid. As a general rule, women's work is socially little known or discredited. However, women's tasks are the most time-consuming and difficult in the agricultural sector (production, storage, processing the harvest, animal husbandry...).<sup>2</sup> This less visible time spent working, often without pay or with very little pay, is interrupted by domestic and household tasks, which puts women at a disadvantage on various levels. Agricultural work at staggered hours or part-time does not allow recognition of a status entitling them to all social protection rights, it limits optimal access to infrastructures in rural areas and does not allow women to be well represented in labour unions.

These women have less options on the educational and professional levels and they have less mobility. They are thus more territorially attached than men. Due to this anchorage to the territory, they are particularly affected by climate variation and ongoing environmental deterioration. The reduced quality and availability of land and the decreasing biodiversity not only complicates their work, but also exposes them to heightened risk when social tension arises regarding access to natural resources.

As women constitute an important agricultural labour force in the Mediterranean Basin, empowering them and boosting their skills is advantageous for families, rural communities and, more generally, for national agricultural and economic production. For women to become acknowledged agents of food security, prevention and adaptation to climate change, technical training alone is not enough. It is likewise important to consider the quality of their participation on decision-making levels. They should be present in greater numbers in institutions of public negotiation and local government and should be in a position to defend value-added proposals for local areas.

## The Mediterranean Diet and the Struggle against Waste

The globalization of trade, changes in lifestyles and major urbanization are progressively modifying the food consumption habits in the Mediterranean Basin. The region is undergoing an accelerated nutritional transition that is distancing it from its former eating habits, namely the "Mediterranean diet," consisting mainly of vegetable oils, cereals, green vegetables and pulses, and characterized by moderate to low consumption of fish, meat and dairy products.<sup>3</sup> Whereas undernourishment continues to affect the most fragile populations in the Mediterranean, the countries in the region are increasingly faced with the scourges of excess weight and obesity, which lead to diet-related disorders such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, etc.

In the Mediterranean, it is women who are mainly responsible for selecting and preparing food. They are thus at the heart of food security for families and stakeholders in health prevention. They are likewise custodians of an ancestral Mediterranean culinary heritage which could disappear due to a lack of adequate transmission to new generations.

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Primarily based on plants, the Mediterranean diet has a low impact on the environment since, in contrast to animal husbandry, it requires less natural resources. A definitive asset for food security, it can likewise contribute to diminishing the region's strong dependence on food imports. The Mediterranean diet recommended by the medical establishment for its nutri-

<sup>2</sup> FAO Regional Conference for the Near East: "Promoting Food Security, Blue Growth and Empowerment of Small-Scale Farmers and Women in the NENA Region," FAO, May 2016

tional qualities thus also affords economic and environmental advantages that can benefit women once they become recognized, valued central actors. The continuity of the Mediterranean diet requires putting a stop to wasting not only food and natural resources, but also human capital. Although in the MENA countries, more women attend university than men and fertility rates have diminished over the past twenty years, women's economic integration remains low.<sup>4</sup> It is estimated that the region loses the equivalent of 27% of its revenue because of women's low labour force participation rates. This non-participation is akin to a true waste of human resources and skills.

### Poverty and migration are challenges, but they can likewise constitute economic and social opportunities for women.

In rural areas where there is a great deal of poverty, women have always worked but are considered the familial labour force (domestic labour is not taken into account in calculating market GDP). According to the little data available, it seems that the number of women in the agricultural labour force in the region has nonetheless grown, going from 34% in 1995 to nearly 45% in 2011. Men's contribution, however, sank considerably during the same period (from 66% to 55%).<sup>5</sup>

The relegation of rural women, whose recognition and status enhancement would contribute to sustainable territorial development, likewise threatens the knowledge and know-how developed by women in subsistence farming, botany and the culinary domain with disappearance. Without seeking to box them into the role of custodians of tradition, women can be more mobilized to participate in the appreciation of endogenous cultural varieties and the institutionalization of a Mediterranean gastronomic culture.

The recognition and promotion of a Mediterranean diet model in which women would be transmitters and innovators calls for strong support from public policies on the national scale, and on the regional scale wouldn't hurt either.

### Rural Women: "Double Jeopardy," Multiple Opportunities

Women in the rural and agricultural spheres in the Mediterranean suffer compounded discriminations and inequalities associated not only with their geographic immobility but also their status as women, such that one can speak of "double jeopardy." Nonetheless, with regard to the challenges in the region, women can be a lever for sustainable, responsible and more socially equal growth.

43% of the MENA population lives in rural areas and, despite efforts made by the countries in this region, poverty is widespread and higher among farming populations. Territorial imbalances and poverty result in the progressive emptying of rural areas of their young, qualified male populations.

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Poor populations represent a potential market that can be harnessed once economic operators manage to adapt to the specificities and needs of this type of consumer. A "poverty-friendly" economic approach could foster lower-cost products and services benefitting the majority, for which women would be a link in the value chain (processing of agricultural products, marketing, sales, etc.).<sup>6</sup>

Men in search of better standards of living often leave behind women who must ensure the family's wellbeing. This increased workload could allow them to gain new skills and expand their decision-making power, an opportunity that can be boosted by the simultaneous elimination of the restraints existing insofar as access to infrastructures, land, property, financial resources and training.

<sup>3</sup> *Mediterra 2012: The Mediterranean Diet for Sustainable Regional Development*, CIHEAM, [www.ciheam.org](http://www.ciheam.org)

<sup>4</sup> "Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate)," World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>

<sup>5</sup> FAO Regional Conference for the Near East: "Promoting Food Security, Blue Growth and Empowerment of Small-Scale Farmers and Women in the NENA Region," FAO, May 2016

<sup>6</sup> PERROT, François. "Vers la construction des marchés au bas de la pyramide. Implications sur la gestion et le financement des projets," *Revue française de gestion*, Vol. 208-209, No. 9, 2010, pp. 45-61.

There are very few women who own land in this region. Only 6.4% of real estate owners in Tunisia are women; 4.4% in Morocco; 4.1% in Algeria; 4% in Egypt and 3% in Jordan. In 75% of cases, this real estate consists of small-scale farms. As a general rule, for reasons of strenuousness, social norms or safety, when a woman owns land, she has a tendency to cede her rights to it in exchange for a percentage of the farming revenue. Women have a harder time travelling than men and managing farms can become a problem that is accentuated by the distance of plots. Studies have demonstrated a strong link between a lack of transport infrastructures, girls dropping out of school and women's low access to quality jobs. In these conditions, the development, not only of roads and collective transport, but also of public spaces more inclusive of women should be considered strategic matters.<sup>7</sup>

The low percentage of women landowners in the MENA region is largely due to succession laws and social customs in effect. Women experience even greater difficulties than men in obtaining credit because the husband's consent is generally required. Illiteracy is another barrier to obtaining credit. This particularly affects older women or women from ethnic minorities who do not speak the country's administrative language very well.

The MENA countries are currently reforming the status of public land and instituting individual farming rights within the framework of agricultural reform. These policies have a great deal to gain by adopting a gender-specific approach and involving women in engineering these new measures. They should also involve men, since they strongly influence the success or failure of women's empowerment programmes. Their inclusion is fundamental for debunking certain stereotypes relegating women to secondary roles, helping them to get more deeply involved in places of learning as well as in decisions outside the domestic sphere, and rethinking rural professions in terms of gender.

Driving home the shared benefits of such changes is undoubtedly the central challenge in these dynamics of transition

Finally, one cannot seriously address the matter of women's empowerment without considering the issue of preschool childcare. Indeed, early childhood services, like other services, are rare in rural and

farming areas, and even more so in the south Mediterranean region. They are, however, a prerequisite to any enhancement of women's capabilities. By consensus, collective preschool childcare meets different sustainable development challenges as expressed by the UN in its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Collective preschool childcare contributes to a balanced development of children in basic education (SDG 4), can raise children and parent's awareness of sustainable natural resource management (SDG 12), facilitates the implementation of health programmes (SDG 3) and fosters partnerships between civil society actors (SDG 17). It also allows the creation of decent employment by giving social rights to women who to date are working in the informal domestic labour sector (SDG 8). And finally, it breaks mechanisms of reproduction of inequalities from one generation to another (SDG 10). Collective childcare services also provide an opportunity to start children on a healthy, quality diet such as the Mediterranean one.

The creation of out-of-school childcare options can maximize the chances for success of capacity-building programmes but require strong involvement of labour and professional organizations in the agricultural sphere.

Rural women demonstrate on a daily level their capacity for resilience and adaptation in the face of constraints. They are bearers of solutions and innovations, greatly contribute to the stability of territories and are agents of transmission of knowledge and expertise that are difficult to match. With regard to the rural and agricultural issues specific to the Mediterranean region, rural women's central role should be promoted, since they are at the heart of sustainable, responsible development. In any case, there is a great deal yet to be done to allow rural women to realize their full potential and be able to apply their skills. Though women's empowerment calls first of all for training and capacity-building, there is another dimension that should not be neglected, namely, transitioning from informal to formal employment. Indeed, empowerment also requires the capacity to turn women's economic activities, which too often remain informal in rural areas, into recognized, valued activities entitling women to social protection schemes.

<sup>7</sup> Agence Française de Développement (AFD). *Accès des femmes à des emplois de qualité au Maroc, Tunisie, Turquie : Dans quelles conditions le travail des femmes devient-il un facteur d'autonomisation ?* May 2015.