

## NOTES

# The disproportionate burden on women in the agricultural sector in North Africa<sup>1</sup>

INES BENABDALLAH, SARA BUSINARO, MARGOT ANGOT

ACSD/UNDP

DANIELA PALERMO, MARINELLA GIANNELLI

CIHEAM Bari

The South Mediterranean region is exposed to numerous challenges related to food, climate, resource availability, and social-economic instability. Characterized by a strong demographic growth, the region has seen consumption patterns and food demand increase recently. The lack of sustainable resource management coupled with the impact of climate change threatens food security and undermines the stability of the region where agriculture is often one of the main employers. It is likely that the domestic food supply will be unable to meet the growing domestic demand and that pressure on resources already threatened by climate change will increase due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Desertification, along with decreasing natural resources availability and climate change, has directly affected the agricultural patterns and crops; and threatens the economy of North African countries (representing a loss of 0.54% of the GDP of Morocco and 0.8% of the one of Tunisia<sup>2</sup>). Moreover, water scarcity represents a significant challenge, as it further jeopardizes food security and biodiversity.

These challenges are likely to increase existing gender inequalities driven by patriarchal social norms and structures. This could create political, socio-economic and systemic barriers that further limit the contributions of women to climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts.

### ***Gender equality and women empowerment***

Achieving gender equality is a national priority for the three countries and has been integrated into policies and constitutional frameworks. However, despite this progressive development, the region still ranked last in the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index.<sup>3</sup> The in-

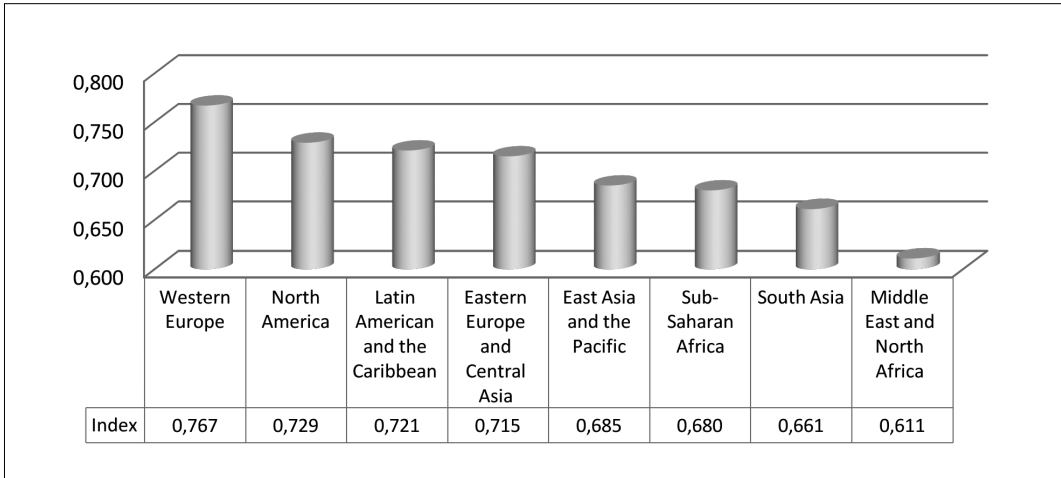
---

<sup>1</sup> This policy note has been drafted as a follow-up to the Development Cooperation Forum “The Food Security-Climate Change Nexus”, organized by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and by CIHEAM Bari, in cooperation with ISPI, held in Rome on 5th December 2019. Based on the recommendations and outcomes of the event, ACSD and CIHEAM Bari have jointly developed this note.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Energy, Mines and Environment of Morocco, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Egypt: 0.629, Morocco: 0.605, Tunisia: 0.644. Source Data: *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, Figure 8. Regional Performance 2020.

Figure 1 - 2020 Gender Development Index.



dex is designed to measure gender-based gaps in access to resources and opportunities in countries. It is calculated the gender gap between women and men in four key areas: health, education, economy and politics to gauge the state of gender equality in the country.

The legal and social context of Arab states shapes gender roles and impacts on gender gap: the role of women is often associated with the family and the private sphere, whereas the role of men is more outward facing to the public sphere [UNESCO, 2017]. Consequently, women are less represented in decision-making positions and in the labor market and have higher rates of unemployment. The legal framework still contains patriarchal codes which along with conservative societal and gender norms and structural barriers limit women's ability to achieve their full economic potential. In 2019 female labor force participation rates<sup>4</sup> (reported below for each country) remained lower in the region than the rate in low and middle income countries.<sup>5</sup>

The three countries have taken stands to prohibit discrimination through their labor codes<sup>6</sup> and Morocco<sup>7</sup> and Tunisia<sup>8</sup> have prohibited gender discrimination and explicitly recognize gender equality in their Constitutions. Nevertheless, gender discrimination is still particularly evident in the labor market in the region, where in 2019 women faced an unemployment rate significantly higher than men (20% against 7.8% for male)<sup>9</sup> and an employment rate significantly lower.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> 46.3% in 2010 (most recent data – World Bank).

<sup>6</sup> Tunisia's labour code prohibits all forms of discrimination between men and women (Article 5 bis, added to the 1966 Labour Law by a Law of 1993). Morocco expressly prohibits gender-related discrimination during recruitment and outlaw differences in workers' pay for equal qualifications and experience (Article 9 of the 2003 Labour Law). Egypt prohibits wage discrimination based on sex, origin, language, religion or creed (Article 35 of Labour Law No. 12/2003). [OECD, 2017].

<sup>7</sup> Law no. 103-13 of 2018 on Violence against Women.

<sup>8</sup> Law no. 58 of 2017 on the Elimination of Violence against Women.

<sup>9</sup> Unemployment, female 2019: Egypt 22.1% (against 7.2% for male), Morocco 10.4% (against 8.6% for male) and Tunisia 23.4% (against 13.4% for male) [World Bank, 2020].

*In Tunisia*, according to Human Development Index, women represented just a quarter of the workforce (24.1%)<sup>10</sup> in 2019 and tend to carry out less skilled and lower paid jobs, despite almost equal level of education.

*In Egypt*, female participation to labor market represents only 22.8% in 2019 (HDI). Many efforts have been put in place to narrow this gap: the 2014 Constitution establishes a strong base to fight the discrimination, and the National Council for Women was re-established in 2016.<sup>11</sup> Also, in March 2017, the government presented its 2030 Women Strategy to focusing on the increase of female employment rates and the improvement of women's access to economic resources.

*In Morocco*, several initiatives were put in place to mainstream gender in policies; such as the Government Plan for Equality (2012-2016); a policy that aimed to promote equality and the integration of women's rights in policies and programs but female labor force participation rates remain low.

An unforeseen event as COVID-19 is likely to worsen women position in the job market in the region. Numerous jobs held by women will be lost and previous trends indicate that they are a less likely to find a new job, since available opportunities are more likely to be awarded to men in times of job loss. Loss of employment is likely to drive more vulnerable people to accept informal jobs and/or unfair work conditions. The economic stress will increase the vulnerability of women, already overrepresented in the informal economy.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Women in agricultural areas and climate change***

In the North Africa region, the contribution of agriculture to the total employment is of 35% in Morocco, 24% in Egypt and 13% in Tunisia.<sup>13</sup> The number of women in the agricultural labor force increased from 26% in the early 90s to a 32% in 2018. In 2017, the sector was employing around 40% of women (against less than 30% of men) of the region. The World Development Indicators (WDI, 2019) shows that around 35% of *Egypt*'s female workforce is employed in agriculture. In *Morocco*, the WDI database reports that 54% are employed in the agricultural sector and contribute to 93% of agricultural and para-agricultural activities.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, in Tunisia only 9.5% are employed in the sector.

However, while being a fundamental part of the labor force, the percentage of women among the total number of agricultural holders remains low (5.2% in Egypt, 5.5% in Morocco and 6.4% in Tunisia<sup>15</sup>). Women farmers also still lack capacities and resources necessary for financial independence and are often less likely to be covered by social protection.<sup>16</sup> Cultural barriers, gender norms, and sometimes low levels of education expose women in rural areas to financial and environmental stress that is often amplified by climate change.

<sup>10</sup> *Human Development Index*, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> *National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030 Vision and Pillars*, National Council for Women, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> *Women's entrepreneurship development assessment*, ILO DWT for North Africa and ILO Country Offices for Egypt and Eritrea, Cairo: ILO, 2016.

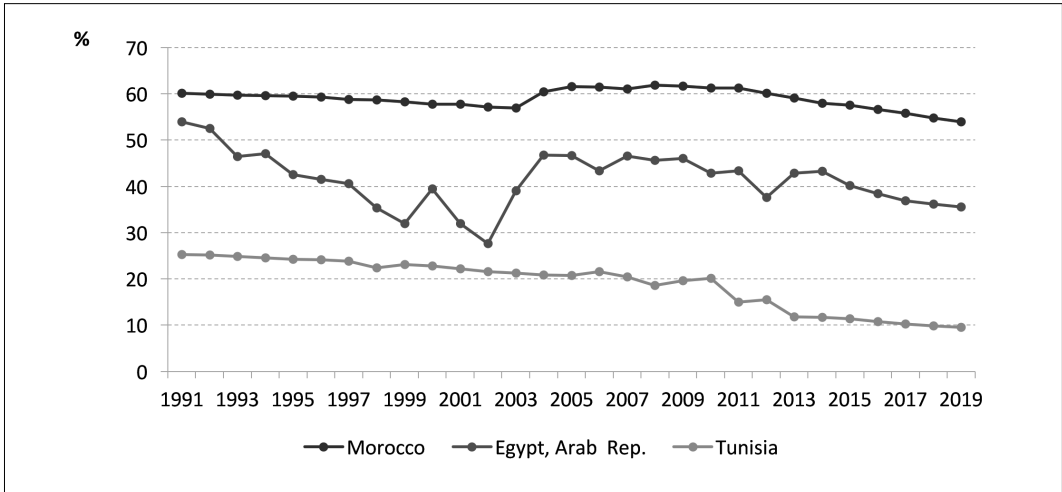
<sup>13</sup> *Employment in agriculture (% of total employment) (modeled ILO estimate)*, 2020, World Bank.

<sup>14</sup> IFAD, ILO 2018.

<sup>15</sup> OECD, Stat 2019.

<sup>16</sup> FAO, 2013, *The interaction between social protection and agriculture*.

Figure 2 - Trends in female employment in the agricultural sector - % (1991-2019) .



Source data: World Bank, *Employment in agriculture, female (% of female employment) (modeled ILO estimate) - Egypt, Arab Rep., Morocco, Tunisia, 2020*.

In an effort to prevent this, Tunisia's parliament adopted a law addressing climate change in 2014; a progressive piece of legislation<sup>17</sup> that also touches on women's rights and healthcare, bringing challenges toward gender inclusion and sustainability of natural resources (Art. 44, 45 and 46). A particular attention is given to the necessary conservation and rational use of water. This gives a solid basis for legislation on environment protection and more sustainable and gender inclusive development. Gender considerations in the context of climate change have also received significant attention from the Egyptian government who released a National Strategy on Mainstreaming Gender in Climate Change in 2011, where it is proposed to work in close collaboration with the gender focal point of the Ministry of Environment to establish a monitoring body and a project team to develop case studies based on implementing an inclusive mitigation of climate change.

In the three elements composing food security, women play a pivotal role: food production, food distribution, and food utilization.<sup>18</sup> Women are vulnerable actors in the agricultural sector meaning that they have a "diminished capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of an external hazard".<sup>19</sup> The most critical drivers of vulnerabilities are represented in Figure 3.

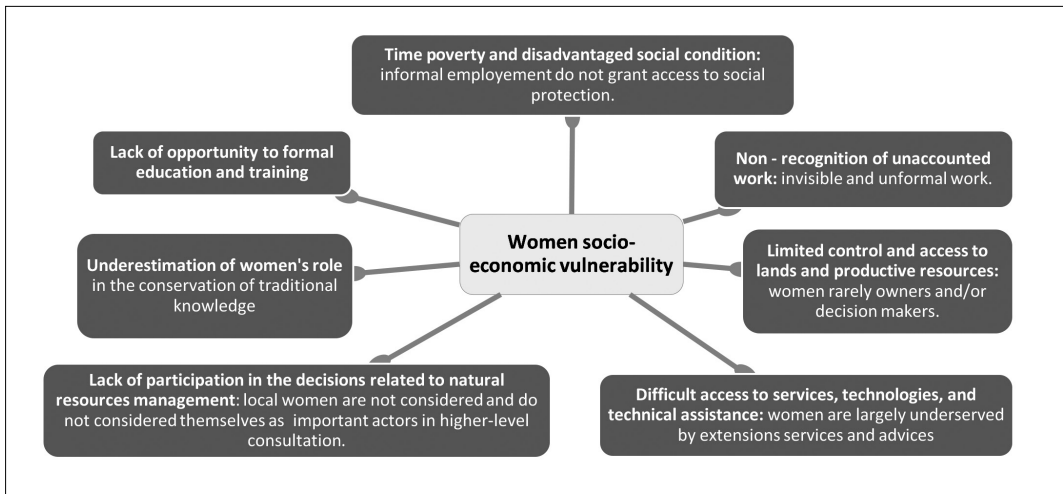
These drivers suggest that the consequences of climate change are not gender-neutral, making these vulnerabilities increase for women at the highest level. Therefore, addressing specific gender-based inequities that contribute to women's exposure and vulnerability to the adverse effects of climate change, is both an imperative and effective means for improving their livelihoods.

<sup>17</sup> 3rd country to embed the importance of climate change in the constitution (after Ecuador and the Dominican Republic).

<sup>18</sup> GCCA – UNDP, *Gender, climate change and food security*, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> The International Federation of Red Cross.

Figure 3 - Mains drivers of women vulnerability in the agricultural sector.



### Recommendations

In a context where global challenges are increasing, further steps are needed to strengthen the role played by women in natural resources management and in building resilience to climate change. In rural areas, there are deep connections between women socio-economic empowerment and sustainable use of resources, on one side, and climate change on the other side. To reduce women vulnerability, due to disproportionate consequences of external pressures, several actions might be taken at three different levels: micro, meso and macro.

At micro level, women's empowerment shall be based on supporting soft skills development (facilitating access to information and ensuring the availability of trainings) or encouraging the creation of groups of women's farmers. This would allow transferring knowledge, expertise, and risks from individuals to groups with the goal to lowering costs by acquiring inputs in common or allowing diversification of activities and minimisation of risks. This might be combined with a better access and control of funding resources (internal<sup>20</sup> and external<sup>21</sup>) to allow women to acquire technologies and resources they might need to develop greener farming and processing techniques. A double impact might be expected from these activities: on one hand women are more likely to reach their full socio-economic potential, on the other hand, by adopting more sustainable resource management methods (optimising water consumption, rotating crops, using flood-resistant seeds and natural fertilizers...) the resilience and adaptive capacities of the women might increase and stress related to resources will likely decline.

At meso level, effective measures shall be adopted to facilitate the establishment of women's platforms creating alliances and networks for climate action and exchanging information to promote sustainable practices in natural resources management. These alliances and networks could also increase communities' awareness on women's role in response to climate change and in protecting the environment from degradation, thanks to their local knowledge of sustainable practices.

<sup>20</sup> Personal capital.

<sup>21</sup> Both formal and informal (eg. tontines).

At macro level, governments and institutions shall be supported in adopting gender sensitive policies and projects focused on climate-resilient capacity development, agricultural education and entrepreneurial guidance. Moreover, this will contribute to reinforce women's leadership as environmental stewards.

### ***About the ACSD***

The Africa Centre for Climate and Sustainable Development (ACSD) was inaugurated in 2019 to accelerate sustainable development in Africa. The Centre coordinates the exchange of knowledge and information to support the attainment of the 2030 Agenda, focusing particularly on access to clean energy, access to water and food security. The Centre started to collaborate with CIHEAM Bari during the same year to present a joint concept note related to women empowerment through Green Agriculture in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco to the Mediterranean Dialogues 2019.