

## Rural women and agriculture in the MENA

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It often takes a paradox to reveal the injustice of a situation. Such a stark paradox is that of the relationship of women with food security. Whereas rural women alone account for the production of half of the world's food, and up to 80% of production in most developing countries, an estimated 7 out of 10 of the world's hungry are women and girls<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, women own less than 15% of land worldwide, and less than 2% of property in the developing world<sup>2</sup>. More bluntly stated in a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) global study, "women do two-thirds of the world's work, receive 10% of the world's income and own 1% of the means of production."<sup>3</sup>

Rural women, which constitute more than a quarter of the world's population, are a dually vulnerable group. Almost three quarters of the poor across the world live in rural areas<sup>4</sup>, and women, are of the most poor in the latter part. The status and role of rural women is thus crucial given their importance in number and decisiveness. As a UNIFEM statement for the world poverty day in 2007 states; women, being deeply affected by poverty, also hold great potential to end it. Indeed, they constitute a big percentage of the labor force, with 428 million women working in the agricultural sector around the world according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), compared to 608 million men in 2009<sup>5</sup>.

Women's status and role does not represent a monolithic bloc. It varies from country to country and within countries, depending on the socio-economic and ethnic groups women belong to as well the environmental factors that vary according to regions. A constant feature is nevertheless discrimination, albeit varying in degree. Rural women do not escape this pattern, namely in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region where discrimination, unequal opportunities and challenges are rampant.

Many structural and implicit causes are responsible for these discriminations and the dissimilar role and status rural women have compared to their male counterparts. These causes range from traditional social barriers to more tangible rules and regulations present in the MENA. Many norms exist positioning and predefining women as mothers and care givers, inhibiting them from access to land, production means, resources, education and opportunities. Moreover, recent food crises and questions related to the commercialization of agriculture and food security have in most cases worsened the situation of rural women forcing them to face new challenges.

This unjust and discriminating status of rural women is surely detrimental on moral grounds, but it is all the

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<sup>1</sup> UNIFEM and Women's Funding network, *World poverty day 2007: investing in women – solving the poverty puzzle*, March 2005

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> FAO, *Women and Rural Employment, Economic and Social Perspectives*, Policy brief number 5, August 2009

<sup>5</sup> FAO Corporate Document Repository, Economic and Social Development department, *A synthesis report of the Near East Region - Women, agriculture and rural development*, adapted from Human Development Report and Country Papers, UNDP, 1994

more detrimental on rational grounds. Indeed, rural women's diminished and hindered role and status has a negative and costing impact on agriculture, societies and food security as a whole. Rural women are indeed an underdeveloped strategic potential for economic and social development. An analysis of the status of rural women in the MENA is thus a necessary step for any initiative aiming at the improvement of the agricultural sector in this region, the enhancement of rural societies' lives and the tackling of the food security issue in the MENA.

Such an analysis is not a simple task, due to the triple nature of the object of analysis which combines gender, societal and geographical components. This briefing note will thus attempt to shed the light on some facts and figures related to the status of rural women in the MENA, all the while focusing on the main challenges to be taken into account in terms of rural women's entitlements in the MENA. These key features can then help delineate where the efforts for the improvement of rural women's lives in the MENA need to be directed.

#### **SOME AREAS OF DISCRIMINATION**

- 1) Rural women work in more precarious conditions than men:
  - Seasonal contracts
  - Work for more hours than men (given the activities that accumulate such as housework and taking care of kids / 17 hours of difference in certain African countries<sup>6</sup>)
  - Often unpaid work
- 2) Rural women have more complex access to:
  - Land ownership (to be addressed in the second part of this paper)
  - Physical resources (energy, transportation, technology)
  - Human resources (namely education, which is also to be addressed later on, weak agricultural training)
  - Financial facilities

## **I. Rural women and land in the MENA**

A preliminary note concerning this issue is that land ownership records do not always exist in some countries and are seldom disaggregated by gender. However, many studies point to the fact that women rarely own land in the region. Moreover, when women actually do own land, it is often controlled by a male member of the family until marriage, and after marriage by their husband or son. In many countries, women also risk losing their entitlements in case of divorce, widowhood or husband migration<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, women that own land seldom purchase it but inherit it. Women also tend to give up their land rights in return for a portion of the land's remittances. Finally, the rare lands owned by women are also smaller in area than the ones owned by men. This bleak overview contrasts with the high percentage of women working in agriculture in the MENA: up to 60% in Morocco and 50% in Egypt for example<sup>8</sup>.

This situation is due to legal constraints and certain traditional norms. According to the UNDP Arab Human Development report of 2009, discrimination against women is evident in Arab states' personal status laws (family laws governing marriage, divorce, paternity, custody of children and inheritance) which often derives from interpretations of Sharia (Islamic religious) law. This legalized gender discrimination has seen some improvement namely in Morocco<sup>9</sup> where reforms of the family code (the Mudawana) in 2004 showed that it is possible to develop Arab laws that would preserve religious fundamentals all the while adopting interpretations that achieve greater equality between men and women. Legislation has also been passed regarding equal pay for equal work as well as gender equality in access to ownership. However, and although most of the MENA countries have ratified the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), many have kept reservations to the Convention, which is the only human rights instrument that specifically addresses the situation of rural women.

These reservations thus serve as a reason for some countries to refuse to implement the Conventions' articles, thus undermining the validity of the convention.

<sup>6</sup> FAO, *Gender and land rights, Economic and Social Perspectives*, Policy brief number 8, March 2010

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Comité économique et social européen, Rapporteur NARRO Pedro, Avis de la section spécialisée "Relations extérieures sur l'agriculture dans le partenariat euro-méditerranéen", Comité économique et social européen, Février 2010

<sup>9</sup> With the example of the Mudawana, Morocco's family code which empowered women in terms of marriage and divorce modalities for example

Enhancing rural women's land ownership is crucial for many reasons. It is firstly a necessary step in the fight against hunger and poverty and an efficient tool in addressing food security issues in the MENA. Women owning more land implies a direct impact on women's capacity to have access to financial resources, which can in turn reduce their vulnerability to hunger and poverty since it would entail their ownership of basic means for subsistence and market production. The latter in turn has beneficial effects on families as a whole. Insuring women's access to land and other productive assets is also long term strategy to increase agricultural productivity and sustainability. Indeed, studies show that if women had the same access as men to land, seed and fertilizer, agricultural productivity would increase by up to 20%<sup>10</sup>

Finally, it is not only necessary to improve rural women's access to land ownership, but it is also important to ensure that women have the capacity to effectively use their land, such as access to financial and technological services.

## II. Rural women and illiteracy in the MENA

According to the UNDP, adult illiteracy is defined as the percentage of the population 15 and older who cannot, with understanding, read and write a simple statement about their everyday lives. Gender disparities are rampant within illiteracy rates. Indeed, two-thirds of children denied primary education consists of girls, and 75% of the world's 876 million illiterate adults are women<sup>11</sup>. These gender disparities are worsened by urban – rural divides.

In the MENA, about 9 million children under 15 years old were out of school in 1995, a figure which is estimated to increase to 13 million children who will not be in school in the coming years<sup>12</sup>. Girls form a large part of this group. Indeed, the Arab region is said to have one of the highest rates of female illiteracy in the world, going up to as much as one half, compared to one third among males<sup>13</sup>. According to a 2006 United Nations report entitled Arab Youth Strategizing for the Millennium Development Goals, women represented 60% of the illiterate population of adults in the Arab region<sup>14</sup>. In Egypt, 41% of adult females were illiterate, mostly in the rural areas of Upper Egypt<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, 54% of rural Upper Egyptian girls aged 13 to 15 are not enrolled in school, compared with 11% of boys<sup>16</sup>. Finally, according to the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in 2009, "every second woman does not know how to read or write» in Morocco, where in rural areas, 83% of women remain illiterate.<sup>17</sup>

Economic pressures, technical issues and societal norms are the principal causes of such discrimination. Indeed, there is a scarcity of schools at the village level which are often distant, and transportation is often difficult and time consuming. The poor quality of education often discourages parents to send their kids to school. Moreover, girls are sometimes inhibited from attending school or are pulled out of school to marry early or to contribute to housework or farming.

The importance of tackling this issue is crucial for many reasons. Besides the lifelong benefits literacy engenders, being able to read and write also allows women to know their rights and make significant use of them, such as land ownership rights or appealing against unfair judgment for instance. Literacy also helps breaking women's confinement to domestic activities which diminishes economic growth and family revenues. Literacy thus has a direct link with women's security and is a significant means of fighting women's deprivation<sup>18</sup>. Other benefits of girls' education include "the reduction of child and maternal mortality, lower fertility rates, improvement of child nutrition and health, enhancement of women's political participation, improvement of general economic productivity and growth, and the protection of girls – and wider society – from HIV / AIDS, abuse and exploitation"<sup>19</sup>.

The World Bank also believes that girls' education yields some of the highest returns of all development

<sup>10</sup> Global Policy Forum, *Women thrive worldwide: The effect of the food crisis on women and their families*, May 2008

<sup>11</sup> UNIFEM and Women's Funding network, *World poverty day 2007: investing in women – solving the poverty puzzle*, March 2005

<sup>12</sup> AZZA Karam, *Girls' education and gender socialization in the Mediterranean*, in 10 papers for Barcelona, European Union Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and European Institute for the Mediterranean (IEMed), February 2010

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006: Literacy for Life; ISKANDAR Laila Nour, *Egypt: Where and Who are the World's Illiterates?* United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005

<sup>16</sup> Save the Children website, Middle East Eurasia, Save the Children Egypt page, 2004

<sup>17</sup> UNICEF and Overseas Development Institute, Nicola Jones, Caroline Harper, Sara Pantuliano, Sara Pavanello, Kim Kyunghoon, Shreya Mitra, Katie Chalcraft, *Impact of the economic crisis and food and fuel price volatility on children and women in the MENA region*, working paper 310, November 2009

<sup>18</sup> AZZA Karam, *Girls' education and gender socialization in the Mediterranean*, in 10 papers for Barcelona, European Union Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and European Institute for the Mediterranean (IEMed), February 2010

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

investments with private and social benefits, both for individuals and for society, as well as intergenerational gain.<sup>20</sup>

## Concluding remarks

An important first observation that can be made is the striking lack of data and statistical information, and its often outdated nature, on the status of rural women in the MENA. Rural women's work is often not reckoned with, be it household or agricultural work. Moreover, surveys, analyses and policies are often not gender based, gender mainstreaming being a concept that has somewhat lagged in the region. This gender bias and opacity in agricultural census data helps marginalize women's contribution in the socio-economic development of rural areas<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, the first step towards elaborating and implementing better policies targeting rural women in the MENA is carrying out more surveys, censuses and studies specifically focused on rural women in the MENA and breaking down data by gender.

The efforts undertaken towards the improvement of rural women's lives in the MENA are slow but undeniable. However, much remains to be done in terms of gender mainstreaming in the field of agriculture and in terms of acknowledging the importance of investing in women, for both local governments and NGO's as well as international organizations. It is also important to build up on past successful experiences such as the positive effects that the inclusion of women in micro-finance and biological agriculture has proven.

A change in perspective is also vital, allowing policy makers to not limit their perceptions of rural women as a vulnerable group, but more as a potential. Indeed, women's proven experience and expertise in certain agricultural activities which have traditionally been assigned as women's responsibility have often been considered as peripheral. However, they form an important and neglected asset for rural communities and the new challenges they face. Including the principle of gender equality is thus vital in policy-making, monitoring and evaluation. A need to push for more services and infrastructure that can allow women to have better access to resources and knowledge is also crucial to enable women to reach their full potential. Improving care services for young children to facilitate women's participation in the labor market is in addition among the prerogatives. Implementing laws that help increase women's presence in the decision-making bodies of companies and political and social organizations is finally a necessity. However, there is a need to go beyond legislation and rules empowering women that exist but that are not applied. Indeed, the social terrain is where the real battles need to be waged in the MENA<sup>22</sup>. Changing mentalities to hinder discrimination processes is a delicate topic. However, through identifying local champions of change, internal dynamics can do wonders.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Council of the European Union, Gender equality in rural areas - Presidency paper and questionnaire, May 5<sup>th</sup> 2010 and Conclusions of the Technical Seminar – European Forum "Women in the Sustainable Development of the Rural World", Cáceres, 27–29 April 2010

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

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