

POLICY BRIEF

Priorities for Research on Gender Equality, Climate Change, and Agriculture in the MENA Region: A Policy Brief

Bipasha Baruah¹ and Dina Najjar².

¹ Professor and Canada Research Chair in Global Women's Issues, Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada

² Gender Scientist, Social, Economics and Policy Research Group, International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), Rabat, Morocco

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Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is extremely vulnerable to climate change and is also the most gender unequal region in the world. According to the Global Gender Gap report, the gender gap is highest in the MENA region (60.9 percent progress toward parity), and “at the current relative pace, it would take an estimated 142.4 years to close” (World Economic Forum, 2021: 26).

Agriculture in the MENA region is becoming increasingly feminized, with women representing more than 50 percent of agricultural workers in some countries (Abdelali-Martini and de Pryck 2015; Najjar et al. 2018). Reducing gender inequality has been identified as an important response area requiring strengthening to enable the MENA region to adapt and build resilience toward climate change. Since women are participating out of choice and necessity in such large numbers in the agricultural workforce of the MENA region, they must be enabled and empowered to serve as active agents in climate change mitigation, adaptation, and resilience.

Although we must be wary of over-generalizing women's needs and experiences across the diverse set of geographic, ecological, cultural, socio-economic, political, and institutional contexts that constitute the MENA region, the

existing body of research on gender and climate change in the region does enable us to confidently comment on what we know and do not know about the opportunities and challenges in women's experiences in agriculture, the gendered effects and outcomes of climate change upon agriculture, and the roles women have played and could play in the future in adapting and building resilience to climate effects. Based on this existing scientific literature, we also identify gaps in evidence and knowledge in this policy brief and make practical recommendations for future research and public policy.





What We Know

- Despite their growing contributions to agriculture and food security in the MENA region, women remain almost invisible in official labor statistics and in policymaking.
- Migration as a coping strategy to diminishing returns from agriculture is more widely available to men. Women often increase their contributions to agriculture to compensate for the outmigration of men, but without commensurate gains in financial or decision-making power.
- Women remain severely marginalized in land ownership, leading in turn to weaker access to credit and capital, training, technology, and other inputs into agriculture.
- There is widespread evidence of gender-based wage inequity and sexual harassment in agricultural wage labor.
- Women have fewer opportunities than men to organize, mobilize, and form agricultural collectives.

What We Don't Know

- The fact that women's contributions to agriculture in the MENA region are undervalued or rendered invisible due to patriarchal laws and regressive social norms is well-established. What is less well known is how best to enable women to gain both legal and social recognition as farmers as well as how best to advocate for reform of male-biased inheritance practices and for gender equality in land ownership.
- Since inheritance practices remain extremely male-biased (and women are often complicit in making them so) it is also important to ask if assets other than land (houses, livestock, jewelry, savings, and investments, for example) can also enable women in agriculture to build economic security and resilience to the effects of climate change. There is very little research on non-land assets owned by women in the MENA region.
- How to enable women to access training in irrigation and other skills deemed "masculine," or otherwise culturally inappropriate for women.
- How to promote the adoption of climate resistant "green" agriculture and rangeland cultivation.
- How to mechanize the agricultural sector responsibly by training those affected in other skills.
- How to empower renter farmers, who are often extremely vulnerable to exploitation by landowners.
- How to create and optimize livelihoods complementary with agriculture.
- How to optimize delivery of extension services and information, both in-person and digitally.
- How to reduce climate risk for farmers, with specific attention to gender equality, via instruments such as crop insurance and green bonds.
- How to support refugees in the MENA who are working (or wanting to work) in agriculture.



- There is very little research on how to optimize participation of youth in agriculture despite evidence suggesting that youth in the MENA region are increasingly disinterested in agriculture as a livelihood strategy.
- There is no existing research on how to adapt or apply policy lessons about livelihood security and social protection learned from the global COVID experience to the agricultural sector in MENA.

Recommendations for Future Research

These are summary actionable recommendations aimed specifically at advancing gender equity in climate adaptation and resilience for agriculture in the MENA region:

- To enable legal recognition of women's contribution to the agricultural sector, we recommend collection and analysis in different MENA countries and contexts of gender-disaggregated data on women's formal and informal participation (including home-based work) in agriculture.
- To enable social recognition of women's contribution to agriculture, we recommend public awareness campaigns aimed at validating and making women's contributions to agriculture and food security in MENA countries visible.
- To promote gender equity in landownership, we encourage reform of male-biased inheritance, land titling, and distribution practices. As an example, joint titling of land in the names of male and female household heads would give large numbers of women in MENA countries a legal claim to land and a source of collateral for credit, other banking and financial services, and inputs into agriculture.
- To design public policy to enhance women's ability to acquire non-land assets as complementary sources of income and livelihood security.
- To enforce equal pay legislation for women and men in agriculture along with zero-tolerance for sexual harassment.
- To introduce and expand social protection programs (pensions, maternity, basic income, and childcare) to enable women to benefit optimally from their work in agriculture.
- To enable women to participate in cooperatives, unions, and collective organizations aimed at improving wages and working conditions in the agricultural sector.
- To conduct more research aimed at understanding the experiences of existing cooperatives and producer groups in the MENA region, as well as in culturally comparable regions such as South Asia and of replicating or adapting them in MENA.
- To carry out more research in different MENA countries and contexts to understand how to enable women to participate optimally in public institutions and decision-making in agriculture.
- To conduct more research in different MENA contexts (rangelands, for example) on how best to enable women to participate in irrigation. The limited existing research in Egypt on gender and irrigation in MENA identifies land ownership, educational attainment, training and other institutional support from government, donors, and NGOs, and access to training in irrigational technologies as factors that enable women to optimally undertake irrigation.
- In addition to enabling women to participate optimally in irrigation, more research is needed to identify opportunities for climate resistant "green" agriculture and rangeland cultivation.
- To enable women in pastoral communities and rangeland cultivation in MENA countries to adapt and build resilience toward climate change, we need more empirical research aimed at understanding the roles they play in their communities, and the challenges and opportunities they face.
- To conduct more research and to identify public policy intervention in anticipation of mechanization displacing agricultural wage work and training those affected in other skills, with particular attention to training women.
- To conduct more research in specific countries and contexts in the MENA region to understand how best to deploy and maintain in-person and digital extension services.
- To conduct research aimed at understanding how to reduce risks for farmers of reduced agricultural productivity and crop failure via instruments such as crop, livestock and asset insurance, green bonds for agriculture, and payment of ecosystem services. Focused attention must be paid within such research projects to ensure equity between landowners (predominantly men) and land users and renters (among whom women are often overrepresented).





- The MENA region is home to some of the largest refugee populations in the world. Research aimed at understanding the challenges faced by refugee farmers in the MENA region is presently very limited but critically urgent. Specific attention must be paid to the needs of refugee women in such research projects.
- To better understand youth perceptions of agriculture, more research is required in different MENA contexts. Research and responsive policies aimed at revalorizing agricultural labor to make it more compatible with contemporary aspirations of youth are urgently needed.
- A deeper structural revalorization of the importance and necessity of the agricultural sector within MENA is also required so that agricultural labor does not continue to be perceived as an occupation of last resort. Public awareness campaigns may be one strategy for accomplishing this.
- To design research to better understand how livelihood security and social protection schemes (basic income guarantees and paid sick leave, for example) introduced in different countries around the world during the COVID 19 pandemic might be introduced or adapted to benefit the agricultural labor force in MENA countries.
- To build the capacity of local research institutions to create evidence-based solutions for gender equality in agriculture and climate resilience, in partnership with NGOs and intergovernmental organizations including CGIAR.

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