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## **Empowering Women in the Rural Labor Force with a Focus on Agricultural Employment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the Middle East and North Africa countries (MENA), agriculture is central to national economies and women play central roles in the production of goods. Gender relationships are fundamental to understanding the way farm work is organized within the household and beyond, the way resources such as land, finance, labor, equipment are managed, and the way decisions are made. The potential of sustainable development and poverty reduction through social and economic growth will not be reached unless there is a true concerted effort by committed government and development agencies to work towards gender equality and women's empowerment. The question addressed in this paper is how do we ensure the empowerment of women and gender equality in the rural labor force through adequate and equitable agricultural employment. In other words, how could the participation of women in agricultural production

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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and processing better address economic growth and poverty reduction? Women in MENA are farmers and family and wage workers, but lack control over most resources and other opportunities. Therefore their contribution to the agricultural development and to the broader economic and social development remains limited. Working towards the empowerment of women and limiting the gender gaps would benefit each nation in poverty reduction and economic development.

Food security in these countries is one of the most important objectives, especially given the high rate of population growth and the young character of these populations who mostly depend upon agriculture. However national governments of the region have still limited understanding of existing gender gaps. Although they have a real willingness to solve the problem, they address women's concerns in isolation from the larger context of national policies and economic reforms. Women's concerns and gender equality can yield tangible results only if addressed by all stakeholders on an integrated manner. National government entities of the MENA region still fear open discussions pertaining to gender equality and the access to and control over resources between women and men. The household is often mentioned as an entity where differences between its members are assumed to be absent. This situation keeps women's labor away from new interventions and technology because of the assumption that when technology reaches the household, it automatically reaches women. In many of these States, there exist laws and regulations on the equality in control over resources and properties, but there are gaps in their proper implementation particularly in rural areas. This is mainly due to prevailing customs and traditions, combined with overall illiteracy, impacting awareness of rights and obligations. The complexity of this issue goes further to search for solutions through questioning the patriarchal gender relations and the political-economic order (Moghadam, 1998). Mainly due to customs, women in MENA represent an important resource that if properly recognized and employed, can make a difference in individuals' wellbeing and economic growth in urban and rural areas.

Gender equality has been set as the Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG3). Its achievement is intimately linked with the MDG targets on reducing extreme poverty and hunger. It is still believed that the creation of gender-aware policy support together with effective development projects that take into account regional specificities has the potential of improving women's agricultural labor status and closing the gender gap.

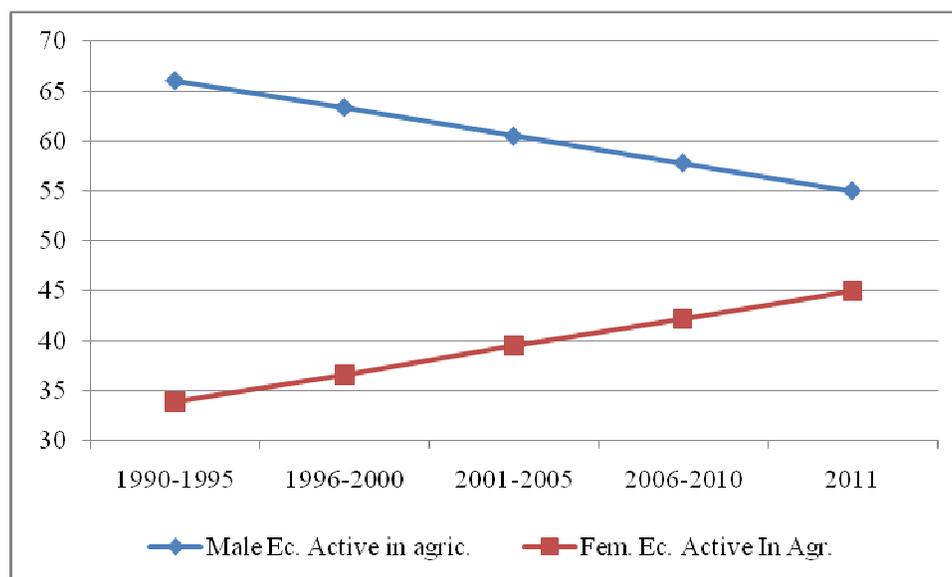
Mainly due to ambiguous definitions, women's economic activities in rural areas including agriculture are almost all informal, thus not fully captured and recognized by the States; and are often not adequately reflected in regulations because they remain largely unknown. These activities are not adequately or not even represented in formal statistics, especially those that are seasonal, temporary or performed at home. This leads to failure to include women's economic activities in many studies that use statistical data to analyze trends in national economies. Surveys at the micro-level that combine qualitative tools with quantitative tools of investigations have proven to be the most useful in capturing these complex sets of activities and their characteristics.

It is estimated that seventy percent of MENA's poor live in rural areas (World Bank, ICARDA). Chronic rural poverty in the MENA countries is concentrated within the most vulnerable social groups of women. The most acute are concentrated in Upper Egypt, specific regions in Iraq, the

mountains and steppes plains of Morocco and north-west Tunisia. However, a high disparity was observed among and within countries. Poverty in MENA, accelerated by high population growth, drought, poor infrastructure, and globalization, has driven more women into the agricultural wage labor, including post-harvest activities and agro-processing industries.

## 1. Trends in Agricultural Labor by Sex in the Middle East and North Africa

Despite the importance of agricultural activities that are not represented in national statistics due to their unpaid and informal characteristics, the female share of the agricultural labor force in the Middle East and North Africa has greatly increased, from 34 percent during the period 1990-1995 to almost 45 percent in 2011, while men's contribution has considerably decreased from 66 to 55 percent during the same period (Figure 1). The trend remains almost the same whether we include or remove the figures of agricultural labor of the Gulf States together with other MENA countries. There are disparities between the countries, and the trend is more important in countries relying greatly on agriculture such as Algeria, Jordan, Syria, Libya, Palestine, and Egypt.



Source: Computed from FAO Statistical Database 2011.

**Figure 1.** Trends of agricultural labor by sex in the MENA region

Women employed in agriculture (accounting for two thirds of all employed women in developing countries) work heavily as unpaid family labor in crop and livestock production, including post-harvest activities such as tomato paste, *freekeh*<sup>2</sup>, milk and other animal products' processing such as wool. They are responsible for storing and processing many products agrobiodiversity products (Abdelali-Martini *et al.*, 2008) which are mainly marketed by men. It was found that old women handle marketing themselves for tomato paste in Syria and for some dairy products in Jordan (Abdelali-Martini and El-Jawhary, 2009, and Abdelali-Martini and Hamed, 2009). A research by Khelifi-Touhami *et al.* (2004b) indicated clear gendered roles of activities

<sup>2</sup> *Freekeh* is crushed durum wheat at a green growth stage and consumed by Syrians similarly as cooked rice.

in *freekeh* production, and recommended the development of *freekeh* enterprises through the establishment of village cooperatives that will reduce the costs of processing and facilitate the marketing, but has not explored the differential empowerment impacts on women, men and children.

Whether performing paid or unpaid work, classified as informal due to their casual and seasonal characteristic, women constitute a vulnerable group whose employment lack safety and decent work conditions. There is also segregation in the type of activities women are “allowed” to perform as a result of the social norms. Their activities also include collecting fuel and water in difficult conditions especially in mountainous areas of Algeria (Abdelali-Martini and Ait-Hamlet, 2005; Chouaki *et al.*, 2010), Yemen, and Morocco. Household’s chores are not considered as economic activities, but remain essential for households’ livelihoods and wellbeing.

Agricultural laborers include women working as wage labor in crop and livestock production as well as in production. Most crop production operations and tasks are performed by women manually, whereas men keep mechanized work that is less constraining, less time consuming and better paid. Many girls are contributing to crop agricultural activities including herding close to household’s boundaries. Women perform home-based work for milk, wool and other post-harvest processing activities for their own consumption and for the market, and to a limited extent some trading and marketing.

However, gender differences in agricultural labor force participation rates, segregation in operations and tasks, safety and work conditions, children’s employment, and wage gaps remain the main issues of agricultural labor markets. Furthermore, despite that in many of the MENA countries males are migrating away from agriculture, leaving the most difficult agricultural activities in women’s hands, women’s management of households and natural resources remain limited mainly due to the impacts of prevailing patriarchal system. Gender stereotypes indicate specific types of work for women under specific conditions, preventing them from entering other types of work traditionally reserved for men.

Temporary casual workers are mostly women performing the majority of operations and tasks, and permanent workers are men employed for irrigation, mechanized work, as farm guards or managers. Women are responsible for the main crops produced in the region. As family labor, men and women share many activities, but women are entirely responsible for home gardens, and for household’s livestock rearing.

## **2. Main features of agricultural labor in the MENA region and gender gaps**

*A feminization of agricultural labor.* The number of wage workers in the region, and more particularly women’s agricultural labor is rapidly growing. The region is characterized by migrant workers of both sexes, with a predominance of male migrants to neighboring countries seeking better paid jobs in non-agricultural sectors. Both smallholder farmers and landless rural households are increasingly relying on wage labor from their households to respond to additional households’ needs. Since the 1980s women’s labor contribution to the total production was reported as much higher than that of men (Rassam, 1984; Rassam *et al.*, 1988). In contrast to

studies referring to the “feminization of agriculture” (Momsen 1987, and Boserup, 1970 and 1993) where agriculture is left to the management of women after males’ migration, research conducted in Syria (Abdelali-Martini *et al.*, 2003a) on the “Feminization of Agricultural Labor” indicated an important increase in women’s agricultural labor in recent years resulting in a new division of labor due to globalization, population increase, and agricultural intensification impacting the differential gender roles as a response to labor market supply and demand. The case study underlines that “the feminization of agricultural labor” depicts the phenomenon that women are providing the bulk of agricultural labor but are not involved in farm management because male heads of households remain on farm, and other males work off farm in urban areas or migrate to neighboring countries for work. In Yemen, previous studies indicated that women are increasingly important in the agricultural labor force, thus working more as wage labor in the Tihamah than in the highlands (Tutwiler, 1990). Similar trends of the feminization of agricultural labor force were mentioned by Bouzidi *et al.* (2010) in some MENA countries. In Syria, Tunisia and Egypt, the majority of wage labor are single (95 and 82 percent respectively), whereas in Morocco, 57% of women laborers were married. However, this type of research remains limited for other MENA countries, mainly because statistics are need to back up micro-level studies. Research conducted in crop-livestock systems, areas with supplemental irrigation, and areas with full irrigation in Syria indicated that the household male and female labor force, aged between 12 and 65 years, contributes to household income through participation in crop management, livestock husbandry and paid work in agricultural and non-agricultural off-farm activities (Khelifi-Touhami, 2004a).

***Migration from agriculture.*** There is an increase in male migration out of the rural areas and agriculture in the MENA countries. Women are involved, to a less extent, in migration in Middle East countries such as Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. They are always accompanied with their male relatives, and not submitted to any formal contracting or migration law (Abdelali-Martini, 2011a), but are making important contributions to household income and poverty reduction. In the few female-headed households found in the study area, women had more margins for decision-making. Migration of women agricultural laborers from Morocco to Spain is a recent phenomenon organized between the governments of Spain and Morocco under specific rules and laws for migration and work. It draws attention to the experiences of injustice in terms of work conditions of women migrant workers but at the same time adding to their sense of self (Zeneidi, \_).

***Impact of migration on children’s education.*** The Syrian case study (Abdelali-Martini *et al.*, 2011a) indicates that male migration negatively affects the education of male and female children, but particularly boys. Males’ absence from rural households resulted in a drop in the number of children attending schools. Women reported that with absence of fathers (child’s role model), it was difficult to manage children, and they were concerned with poor school attendance and performance. This could be a long-term negative impact of migration.

***Importance of women’s wage labor in agriculture and differential gender roles.*** As in many developing societies, Arab society does not acknowledge the true extent of women’s participation in social and economic activities and in the production of the components of human well-being, and it does not reward women adequately for such participation (UNDP, 2005). Agro-industry and rural industrialization has increased the possibilities for women to access cash

income through self-employment or to set up rural enterprises, and wage employment allows women to get out of the relative isolation of the home or their small rural communities and gain self-esteem and confidence (UN, 2005). Wage labor in agriculture is rapidly growing in MENA as a result of rapid population growth, a limited natural base, and low wages in agriculture that are drawing men out of the sector and drawing more women into it, mainly because women have less flexibility than men for moving far from their households. Women are mainly concentrated in the production of high intensive labor crops such as legumes and vegetables where most activities are manual except plowing and sometimes planting, and men are performing mechanized activities (plowing, combine harvesting, planting, etc.) that require limited number of men during specific times, allowing flexibility to work outside the agricultural sector (Abdelali-Martini, 2008; 2011a). Research on gender and agro-biodiversity conservation in four countries of West Asia (Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine) indicates that the roles in agriculture are shared between women and men of different ages contributing to agricultural activities and agro-biodiversity conservation. Women are involved mainly in weeding, harvesting, food processing and transformation, while men are responsible for land preparation and planting. Women's knowledge of the quality attributes of landraces and of the use of medicinal, herbal and aromatic plants is an important driving force which sustains the use of these species at the farm level and contributes therefore to the on farm/in situ conservation of the dry land agro-biodiversity. However, despite their knowledge and heavy involvement in these activities women do not control all the income generated from these products because in many parts of the study areas, men are responsible for marketing and thus keeping the proceeds from sales (Abdelali-Martini, 2008). The research ends by indicating that the empowerment of women through adding-value and alternative sources of income options is needed to enhance their role in the conservation and sustainable use of this agro-biodiversity of global significance.

Growth of agricultural labor in MENA was mainly driven by high population growth in areas where drought and poverty are the most acute, and the introduction of new crops for agro-industry such as sugar beet, potatoes and olives in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. This has resulted in an emergence of the use of agricultural labor under specific arrangements where men and women labor contractors lead and supervise large numbers of women agricultural labor in Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Specific research (Abdelali-Martini and Goldey, 2011b) has illustrated, based on one example from Northwestern Syria, the importance of this phenomenon, the cultural behavior driving the structure and working mechanisms of these arrangements and the resulting women's wage labor opportunities.

Regarding market institutions, Elson (1999) indicates that the participation in labor markets does not automatically empower women mainly due to the absence of institutional change and labor market regulation. In MENA, working towards achieving both efficiency goals and gender equality lies in the elaboration of efficient policies, but also in monitoring the implementation of these policies in combination with awareness and capacity building for women regarding their rights and obligations, and raising their bargaining power on wages and work conditions.

*Agricultural mechanization* is still far from women and bypassing them. It is now well established that mechanization serves to reduce women's workload and facilitate some hard operations. In MENA region, limited or no effort is being made to develop tools suitable for

women, or to train women in using agricultural and maintenance. Lentil mechanization was initiated about 2 decades ago but has not materialized due to its high costs.

***Control over resources.*** In the MENA region, like in other parts of the developing world, strengthening women's access to and control over productive resources/assets such as land, capital, knowledge, information and technologies remain important factors of an enabling environment for women's empowerment. Though the complexity of prevailing social system in MENA makes this more difficult, especially when women remain illiterate with no means to face the external world and women's behaviors are still bound by social ties. Women who have assets are obliged to abandon them for the benefit of their brothers even if not in complete agreement because brothers constitute their fall-back positions (Agarwal, 1997). In a study conducted in Jordan and Syria, women land owners had to dispose of the land for the benefits of their brothers in order to guarantee family support in case they are divorced or rejected by their husbands so they can still find a place to stay, that is of their brothers (Abdelali-Martini and Al-Jawhary, 2009, and Abdelali-Martini and Hamed, 2009). Also, in Jabal El-Hoss area of Syria, development projects have succeeded in providing women with financial assets, this did not automatically translate into more control over resources and assets, for many households men utilized women to get the financial assets, and then disposed of the money the way they wanted. Women have, however, been able to contribute to running the businesses and to decision-making with their male relatives based on the financial assets they were provided with.

### **3. Gender Issues Limiting the Empowerment of Women in Agriculture**

***Precarious quality of education in rural areas.*** Literacy has been clearly recognized by The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, as to have the capacity to empower women's participation in decision-making in society as well as to improve families' well-being (United Nations, 1995-1996). Also well established in the literature, education improves individuals' wellbeing and economic and social development. The improvement of education in urban areas of MENA is very encouraging and female's enrollment rates are sometimes bypassing those of males at all levels of the education system. The Arab Human Development Report (UNDP, 2005) indicates that while literacy rates are not high in comparison with other developing countries, enrollments in high school and universities are very impressive. In 1997 female and male literacy rates of 46 and 71 percent in Arab countries were marginally better than 49 and 65 percent in Africa. While this remains true in urban areas, education is limited in rural areas where infrastructure is lacking, and schools availability is still limited especially beyond the primary levels in poor and small villages such as in Jabal El-Hoss in Syria (Mazid *et al.*, 2003), and the mountains of Ighil Ali in Algeria (Chouaki *et al.*, 2010). As indicated by Moghadam (2003), women have more options in an urban setting, whereas in rural areas, patriarchal family arrangements limit their options. Furthermore, the complexity of the subject and the diversity of options in the region suggest that a variety of socio-economic, cultural and political factors interact and generate these situations. The most challenging injustice is that many girls are excluded from education in rural areas, because of the lack of primary schools in their villages. This is particularly alarming in view of the labor market challenges of the new era of the 21st century. At the primary school level, one classroom is often home for students of different educational levels, an evidence that results in poor quality of education, which will be reflected on the economic and development growth of these populations

and countries (Abdelali-Martini, 2011a, and Mazid 2003). Illiteracy of women's agricultural workers has reached up to 80% in Egypt, 92% in Morocco and 96% in Tunisia (Bouzidi *et al.*, 2010).

***Work conditions, occupational health and safety for casual and home-based agricultural workers.*** Research conducted in Egypt (Bouzidi, *et al.*, 2010) and in Syria (Abdelali-Martini and Goldey, 2011) indicates that the quality of transport means exposes women's wage labor to high health risks. The carrying capacity of the transport means is inferior to its actual use, affecting labor's health and exposing them to vulnerability. Unsafe transport means for agricultural workers were reported in many studies conducted in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan and Syria. These include tractor trailers, *trezinehs*<sup>3</sup> and small capacity vans and trucks where large numbers of agricultural workers are transported to work, oftentimes on standing positions. Legislation in MENA is still lacking in this area, and enforcement of laws remains a concern in countries already dotted with proper legislation.

In Egypt, the relationship between the contractor and the workers was often marked by physical violence and immorality. The authoritarian and sometimes humiliating and aggressive men labor chef in Morocco and the harassment by the farm owner in Tunisia in addition to domestic violence following the late return from work were reported by Bouzidi (2010).

In Algeria, research was conducted on the processing of wool for a national traditional garment called *qashabiya* - very much popular among national officials and used as a prestigious gift at high levels in the country - to assess the impact of this work on the health of women and girls who are often home based workers. Home-based weaving has been found to have serious ailments related to weaving activities. Through an on-going IDRC project, researchers are studying the phenomenon and trying to involve local specialized doctors to establish the link between the ailments and weaving occupation, a link that was never made before most probably because women are not reported to be working outside the households' boundaries. Ailments included bones deformation due to bad work positions and allergies from wool. The impact on women's health is serious and harmful, and the question was never addressed before. Agreement was made with doctors to prepare a special interview questionnaire to further clarify the issues, and to come up with sound recommendations for solutions (ICARDA/INRA on-going project: Abdelali-Martini *et al.*, 2011). Other health problems related to agricultural activities including back pain and allergy while harvesting legumes and vegetables were reported by women performing most of the manual activities.

Options to overcome this include: a) working closely with doctors, and policy makers to make the occupation and related health problems recognized and treated under specific health coverage; b) sensitizing key decision-makers to support and provide medical services for women injured as a result of performing home-based activities that have an economic value at the local, national and international levels; c) raising awareness on weaving health issues (a project has started to create a voice for a targeted and improved delivery of health services to home-based women workers, and hopefully insurance for agricultural casual labor).

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<sup>3</sup> Small motor-tricycle with a trailer where women workers are standing up due to lack of space.

Despite the existence of some laws in MENA countries, accidental and health issues remain an area of big concern. Agricultural laborers are not aware of their rights to safety and medication in case of accidents. Many farmers and labor contractors hide work accidents and real causes of accidents, and provide the minimum support in case of extreme emergency.

***Segregation in operations and tasks and differences in remuneration.*** Despite the prevailing masculine culture and values that see women as dependents of men (UNDP, 2005), research from MENA countries indicate that the contribution of women in on-farm labor varies among crops and farming systems. While they contribute to the production of almost all crops including trees and summer crops, with the exception of the highly mechanized crops such as cereals where their contribution is limited to weeding and/or roguing, their activities are mainly concentrated in manual activities that are hard and low paid. Men's contribution on the contrary dominates the management of households, some manual activities such as tree-pruning, filling cotton bags, and mechanized activities that are less time consuming and better remunerated in addition to controlling all marketing activities for the farm produces. Men are responsible for almost all mechanized activities. Within a household, women's labor contribution to the total crop production was much higher than that of men (Abdelali-Martini *et al.*, 2003b; 2008; Rassam, 1984; Rassam *et al.*, 1988).

As an example from these activities in rural Syria (Abdelali-Martini and Goldey, 2011), a man is paid between 2500 -5000 SP (US\$40-90) per day for pruning about 100 small trees, or filling up cotton bags at 550 SP per day (US\$12) and a woman harvesting and weeding legumes all day long is paid 200-300 SP per day (US\$6), with a maximum of 350 SP per day for harvesting lentil because it is a delicate crop and grains chatter if not harvested on time. Picking cotton is paid 200-250 SP per day (US\$4-6).

***Control of women over income and other resources.*** Women also suffer from limited or absence of access to physical assets, particularly land in rural areas and financial assets. Lack of property rights to inheritance of land and other fixed assets – mainly driven through customs and social norms - and the socio-cultural factors that determine inheritance severely limit women's access to and control over resources (Khelifi-Touhami, 2004a).

Furthermore, they are not remunerated for family work, and many of them do not control their income when they work as wage labor on other farms especially when families are very poor. In fact they mainly work as wage labor when families are poor; otherwise, they prefer to stay home as a prestige (Abdelali-Martini *et al.*, 1997) and symbol of wealth under MENA regional standards.

***Child labor in agriculture.*** The hazards for working young girls include physical abuse, no protective gear, and exposure to chemicals that may increase risks to reproductive capacity, little information on hazards, and no medical services. However, surveys also indicate that families would prefer to send their children to school but need the income additional family members provide (ILO 2004). Child labor use is common in agriculture of the region, though they work more within family labor in crop and livestock production, and are not remunerated directly. However in some countries where women are organized into groups to work off-farm in other areas of the country and beyond such as in Syria (Abdelali-Martini *et al.*, 2003a), they constitute

from a quarter to a third of women's labor groups. Most women's labor are young and mainly constitute of girls between 18 and 25, in addition to a few old women who have completed their child rearing responsibilities, and children of both sexes aged 9-11 years despite that the Syrian Law allows work in agriculture only starting 12 years old. Almost 10 to 20 percent of the women's labor force comprises children said to be "helping" their mothers or sisters. Furthermore during olive harvest season of October and November, rural households that are hired to pick up olives take their children with them as "helpers". This greatly affects their schooling. Little girls work mainly in weeding, legume harvesting and olive picking, which expose them to dust, chemicals, and long hours under the sun.

Despite that most rural and agricultural families indicated that education is key to the development of their children, there is still a lack of adequate schools and quality education within the villages, in addition to a lack of intermediate and secondary schools for girls who wish to pursue education. Rural families value education, and are aware of the quality of education provided to their children under poor infrastructure, but struggle to provide additional income for their households, thus employing their children, mainly because the bulk of agricultural labor in rural areas is provided from very poor households.

More girls are at risk of quitting schools to work in agriculture, and boys at risk of quitting school due to absence of fathers (Abdelali-Martini *et al.*, 2011a). Boys and girls quit schools to pick up olives while away from their residence with their parents for dairy processing in other areas (Abdelali-Martini and Aw-Hassan, 2007).

***Gendered spaces.*** In Arab States' rural communities, labor market transactions and related knowledge about labor and farm production are made within the public spaces. Such spaces are mainly male-dominated. Women farmers are generally absent from these spaces, and not recognized on equal basis as men. They are mainly considered as "women helping their husbands" rather than farmers themselves because they live in a man-dominated society even when they know more and work more than men in agriculture. Oftentimes, when heads of households are absent for short or long periods of time, women's behavior is to seek the help from an old son or a trusted male relative to represent them or to negotiate a labor-contract on their behalf. Some women are even not concerted when men contract on their behalf for agricultural work. Most women remain in the background and accept men's show up at their place in the market and other public spaces, a behavior supported by social norms and men's protective behavior still considered rewarding by the society.

However, discussion from the above study about women labor contractors revealed that some women fought for recognition by farmers and males' labor contractors because this activity was exclusively for males. It took time for farming communities to accept women into the business. Some women were old and single, thus no man at home to call upon. Some of them were single and learned the business by helping their fathers, to later become in control over the business. However, male contractors do not miss the opportunity to mention that these women contractors are responsible for smaller labor groups and that they cannot expand their businesses the way men do, especially that being a women labor contractor is paid just like men, and this looks somehow "devaluing" and a bit "shameful" for men. Men indeed recognized openly that women workers by far prefer to have women labor contractors as supervisors because interaction with

them is easier than with men, and they understand better women's concerns. This story suggests that activities previously done only by men are now opened to women given their success in "male spaces", a finding supported by Saugeres (2002) who can offer similar accounts. In Iran, due to night shifts of irrigation that are secured by men, women are excluded altogether from irrigation activities due to cultural norms that prevent mixing women with the "stranger" men who organize irrigation shifts.

#### **4. Main factors driving progress towards women's economic empowerment**

***Change in attitudes and awareness.*** These are of two types: those perceived by women about themselves and those perceived by others about women.

- *Women's attitudes.* Changes in women's attitudes are among the most critical factors in driving progress and economic empowerment. Rural women in MENA still perceive themselves as inferior to men, which leads to fewer rights over resources and decision-making, a perception dominating societies working under patriarchal systems. According to the sustainable livelihood framework developed by DFID, women's power should come from inside. Therefore working towards awareness sessions to help women perceive themselves as entire human beings that deserve recognition on the same basis of other members of the households, enabling them to perceive the range of options available to them, and building their capacity to choose from them constitute the start of any potential successful empowerment intervention. More importantly, women should learn to put their own interests at the forefront besides those of other members of the household. The development of indicators of agriculture women's labor empowerment in a participatory manner will contribute to increasing women's agency.
- *Others' attitudes.* With no intention of breaking a working social system, changes should target the behavior of women's working for free taken-for-granted positions, the "normality" of women accepting their secondary roles, and the domination and support to legitimize the social prevailing order. Men and women should see each other as complementary and both important in society. Empowerment should be seen as individuals building constructive relationships through joint efforts and mutual support for better livelihoods and food security.

***Education at the forefront towards empowerment.*** Education has remained one of the most important factors that have the potential of initiating empowerment initiatives. Research conducted in Settat community of Morocco on education of women and girls reported that literacy courses have allowed the use of mobile phones by rural women. This was perceived as "a liberation of excellence by women". Literacy programs delivered to rural women have contributed to improving their daily lives, especially those who benefited from courses for two continuous years. For the success of such delicate initiatives, the research recommends a good planning and follow-up, to empower the community as a participatory socio-economic unit, including women and girls to work towards avoiding absenteeism, to form homogeneous classes, to document the process, to develop and create support, and to develop adapted tools in collaboration with participants. However, women responsible for livestock after male migration "could not benefit from the literacy courses offered in their communities due to their busy schedules" (Nassif, 2008), but literacy programs, skills development, and access to relevant information with strong household and community support, remain key to tapping into women's

capacities (Nassif and Bouayad, 2010). One would argue that the introduction of a measurement for the empowerment impact could add to the success of such types of initiatives. Thus, improving infrastructure in rural areas by establishing primary schools at village levels has the potential power and strength to push girls' enrolment in education forward, preparing them for a better future.

***Equity in access to resources.*** Empowerment of women in rural and agricultural labor force is affected by a number of factors that have the potential of facilitating the change. These include the access to information, financial resources, ability to take decisions to join school etc. All these are interlinked because information alone is not enough and having the choice to go or not to go to school is also linked to the financial capacity to pay for it. Spiering's research (2007) denounces the 'cultural thesis' that puts emphasis on cultural factors only, often conceptualized in terms of 'Islam'. It focuses at the micro level, on needs, opportunities, and conditions that are important in determining women's chances, without a clear dominance of one of these conditions, and stresses the macro-level factors, or the context, in shaping the effects of micro-level factors.

## **5. Main obstacles and challenges for achieving the above desired results**

***Customs and traditions*** and religious beliefs are the strongest obstacles facing women's empowerment in MENA. Males are privileged in rural communities, where patriarchal structures dominate, and support existing social structure, taboos, perceptions of the role of women, and geographic isolation.

***Local policy makers*** are ***unaware of*** the reality of gender equality and gender mainstreaming, the inequity of opportunities for capacity enhancement, schooling in rural areas, training and their impact on the overall poverty reduction and improvement of livelihoods strategy at the national and international levels.

## **6. Good practices and key lessons learned**

*My own understanding of a good practice is a practice learned from a successful process. It should have the potential for being sustainable. It is a practice that has the strength of bringing women's vision, opinions, needs and aspirations into development initiatives, and resulting in increase in opportunities for women.*

***Promoting equity through representation and participation.*** In Afghanistan and Pakistan, an IFAD/ICARDA project has trained women trainers on hygienic milk handling, milk quality control and milk processing with provision of the necessary equipment to women beneficiaries (Tibbo *et al.*, 2008).

In an ICARDA's project (Asamoah, *et al.*, 2011) on "Enhancing livelihoods of poor livestock keepers through increasing use of fodder", special efforts were made to target women farmers and housewives to play a greater role in small-scale lamb fattening and dairying, to build their

capacity in fodder innovation with an aim of contributing to their empowerment in Syria. The following activities were conducted:

- A special field day was organized for women at El-Bab (Syria) which was attended by women from Salamieh and Barkoum village (project sites). Representatives from all pilot sites participated in field days and exchanged knowledge and experience. Field days also allowed cross-site visits for joint learning through which women were encouraged to participate in project activities.
- With the collaboration with Aga Khan Foundation, training on milk processing was organized for women at Salamieh (2009). This allowed women from El-Bab to visit Salamieh for knowledge exchange and acquire additional knowledge to improve the quality of milk products and explore new and scientific methods of milk processing which have the potential for households' income improvement (Asamoah *et al.*, 2011; Hilali, 2007).
- Implementation of many Awassi sheep fattening trials in Homs, Salamieh, El-Bab and Barkoum with the support of ICARDA and Aga Khan Foundation exposed women to learning practical and scientific methods in lamb fattening which have the potential of reducing the loss in feed resources and increasing the gains and outcomes.

However, despite the good technical work, one option would be to conduct additional assessment of women's empowerment to further clarify the differential benefits of women and men within households.

## **7. Proposed Options for Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Related Activities**

The strategy for women's empowerment into the agricultural labor force, and equity in participation, choices, opportunities, knowledge information and acquisition is to strengthen awareness and to work through changing attitudes towards women's work and empowerment. This could be achieved both through legislation, and strengthening capacities to change attitudes in MENA. The different and complex experiences of the MENA countries in relation to the conditions and responsibilities of women's agricultural labor, and the analysis of the experiences and interventions that have succeeded as well as those that have failed, generate some key policy actions and / or options that can contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment:

1. Ensure that agricultural labor concerns are high on the governmental agendas in MENA countries. This could be achieved through working with policy-makers towards building their capacities to change their views about women from being the victims and most vulnerable groups in societies to a real force that can make a difference in the socio-economic growth of the nations if women's issues are better recognized and addressed.
2. Encourage the inclusion of measurement of women's empowerment and equality in all research projects and development initiatives.
  - a. Many projects are working at the community level without a specific target for women, and their work is in reality impacting women's knowledge, income, capacities etc. in

- many ways. But existing projects are not yet reflecting this in their research reports (Mashreq-Maghreb community level research).
- b. Capacity building was conducted in many projects for dairy processing, and successful stories are told about the impact of the capacity building of women. However, it was hard to trace that impact from available reports, mainly because empowerment was not expressly set as an objective of the study.
3. Support rural women through continuous awareness raising and capacity building regarding their rights at work, the conditions of their employment, safety-related issues such as ailments that are not seen and considered by many governments as related to women's activities.
  4. Establish primary schools in remote rural areas to ensure girls' education, and provide financial help for those who need to complete college and secondary schooling in other areas, including other types of capacity building. Ensure that quality of education is at least similar to that provided in urban areas in terms of adequate infrastructure in order to maintain enrolment at high levels. In the MENA region, providing more financial means for girls' education alone cannot remove the barriers to girls' education. Working on awareness at policy-makers', community's and households' levels are required. Furthermore, issues of access to and control over land and other resources will be facilitated by women's education and awareness (to be sustainable, it should come from the inside). Involve all types of women's agricultural labor in literacy and capacity building activities.
  5. Develop gender-specific strategies that can be used by researchers, development agencies and local NGOs to reach all potential rural women.
    - a. Ensure that all types of agricultural labor - casual, temporary, family and wage women's work in rural areas are well represented in national statistics. Women's work in agriculture is poorly represented in national statistics, particularly those activities that are unpaid (such as household chores and many of the family and other home-based agricultural activities), which further contribute to marginalizing women. Therefore targeting rural women to understand gender relationships in MENA at the micro-level surveys and statistical censuses would be the first step towards better addressing women's concerns and elaborating better policies aiming at improving women's labor force status and empowerment indicators. The disaggregation will also shed light on children's employment in agriculture and the related trends, and help address potential development options.
    - b. Extension agencies often have women employed in rural areas to address women and gender issues. They are generally not trained, nor have the means to undertake their work properly and reach women of remote areas. Therefore, improving women's extension agents' capacities through gender awareness and gender analysis capacities in addition to transport and financial means to reach women workers in agriculture should be set among priorities. They will be able to address some tangible gaps through participatory means, identify opportunities to be addressed at regional levels, and assess time-use by gender, farming systems and differential agro-ecologies.
    - c. Fill the gap by better addressing the different types of home-based activities and the generated health problems through disaggregated information and analysis, options for

investment in infrastructure and technologies that limit health problems, facilitate women's work and incomes, address required labor-saving issues and promote health protection.

6. Women's work in rural areas of MENA differs by farming systems and agro-ecological conditions. Therefore, identifying the differential opportunities where women are the most active will better direct development initiatives aiming at empowering women and reaching equality.
  - a. Evidence has shown that the contribution of women of MENA in agricultural labor force is increasing, while that of men is decreasing. These results would have increased by adding all activities that are not captured by national statistical data such as weaving home-based work and dairy processing, post-harvest activities, and processing of agro-biodiversity products (Abdelali-Martini *et al.*, 2008). Women are generally hidden actors of the different value chains of these products, and their work need to be valued, while quality improvement could be enhanced through capacity building.
  - b. Address the lack of gender disaggregated data of women's labor in agriculture (paid, unpaid, home-based paid and unpaid, seasonality, causality etc.), through further collection of gender disaggregated data at the micro level using a combination of participatory, qualitative and quantitative methods and tools to assess the real impediments and opportunities of gender equality and women's empowerment.
7. Technology adoption and impact in areas where women and men are involved are generally done at the household's level without expressed and adequate gender disaggregation of information and data. This needs to be reviewed and considered for all aspects of agricultural labor. Qualitative information is as important as the quantitative ones in conservative societies because it allows unveiling aspects such as safety and equity, which are usually not adequately mentioned.
8. While development initiatives have always targeted women in development aspects such as micro-finance, literacy courses, market access, research in the MENA region has not always followed in evaluating the paths of these initiatives in women's empowerment as well as identifying the hindering gaps and challenges. Evaluation of women's labor constraints and opportunities as well as the importance of understanding women's empowerment as a catalyst for national economic and social growth by all stakeholders and decision-makers would only be possible based on tangible research and development results. This will build capacity at different levels.
9. Support rural women and young girls to market their products at good prices, through opening special shops at the village and governorate level (dairy, wool, embroidered dresses, napkins etc.). Many women have learned from development projects some income generating activities, but lacked access to market. As a result, they were exploited by traders against low payment for their products.
10. An option for reflection is to reduce differential wages in agriculture. In most countries of the world, differential wages are explained through education, age and other factors and are mainly due to the differences in occupations and the perceptions of the employees about their

earnings and the measurement of incentives to seek work in other areas or economic sectors (see also Hertz *et al.*, 2008). In the agricultural sector of MENA, location and type of activities are largely responsible for wage differences, therefore the response lies in the differences found between agricultural and non-agricultural activities and the lower paid activities left for women, a gender and social bias problem to be tackled at higher levels.

11. Develop a specific financial plan of action for the empowerment of agricultural women's labor.

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