

DOES THE FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR EMPOWER WOMEN? INSIGHTS FROM FEMALE LABOUR CONTRACTORS AND WORKERS IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

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Abstract: With major socio-economic changes in the Middle East and North Africa spurring men's exit from agriculture, women now represent over 60 per cent of the agricultural workforce in several countries. Drawing on original field research, this paper analyses the emergence of female agricultural labour contractors and female wage labour groups in north-west Syria and compares the outcomes for the contractors' and labourers' empowerment with regard to four dimensions of power or agency: power *within*, power *to*, power *over* and power *with*. An evolving but delicate balance between continuity and transformation has permitted modest gains in women's empowerment without challenging intrahousehold gender power relations. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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1 INTRODUCTION

While most regions and countries are experiencing a declining share of agricultural employment in total employment for both men and women, male agricultural employment rates have generally declined much more steeply as more young men pursue higher education or find better paid, higher status industrial or service jobs (ILO, 2011). In contrast, women's share of agricultural labour is rising in a number of countries and

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Table 1. Female share of the economically active population in agriculture in the Middle East and North Africa

Country	1980	1995	2010
<i>Middle East</i>			
Jordan	41.9	44.3	62.2
Lebanon	28.3	32.8	32.1
Occupied Palestinian Territory (A)	64.8	64.1	72.5
Syria	31.7	50.7	60.7
Turkey	40.4	48.2	52.3
Yemen	29.3	31.4	40.1
<i>North Africa</i>			
Algeria	41.5	50.4	52.7
Egypt	25.9	34.9	40.3
Libya	37.2	50.0	69.9
Morocco	29.0	38.9	47.7
Sudan	32.5	32.9	39.5
Tunisia	27.1	34.4	32.8
Western Sahara	42.1	47.8	53.7

Source: Extracted from FAO, 2011, Table A4. (A)=FAO estimate. The Gulf States, where there is little agriculture, are excluded.

sometimes exceeds half the labour force, giving rise to the term ‘feminisation of agricultural labour’. These trends are particularly striking in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) where women’s average share of the agricultural labour force increased from 30 per cent in 1980 to almost 45 per cent in 2010 (FAO, 2011) and exceeded 60 per cent in Jordan, Libya, Syria and the occupied Palestinian Territory in 2010 (Table 1).

While these large increases in the female share of the agricultural labour force (and the economically active population)¹ partly reflect the growing availability of gender-disaggregated data because of changes in definitions of work and better data collection methods (Tzannatos, 1999; Doss, 2014), significant socio-economic changes are also contributing to these trends (FAO, 2011). However, women’s growing labour force participation does not necessarily mean an improvement in their employment *status* relative to men or in their well-being. In agriculture, women’s employment status depends on gendered power relations in access to and control of productive assets (especially land), labour, services and/or jobs. Even women with land rights under customary, religious and/or civil law are often unable to exercise their rights and farm independently (FAO, 2011). This is particularly evident in MENA countries for which data are available: the female share of agricultural holders was only 4.1 per cent in Algeria, 5.2 per cent in Egypt, 4.4 per cent in Morocco, 3 per cent in Jordan and 7.1 per cent in Lebanon (FAO, 2011, Table A5). Furthermore, compared with men, few women in the region’s rural workforce undertake wage labour: on average, only 1 per cent of women compared with 9.4 per cent of men engaged in agricultural wage labour and 3.9 per cent of women and 30.9 per cent of

¹These trends also reflect the large increases in the female share of the economically active population (that includes persons seeking work), which rose substantially between 1980 and 2010 in several MENA countries (FAO, 2011, Table A3). These increases are particularly significant because female participation rates in the region were the lowest aggregate rates in the world, at 18.4 per cent in 2011 for the Middle East and 24.2 per cent for North Africa, compared with 74 and 74.1 per cent for men respectively (ILO, 2012: 73 and Table A8).

men in rural non-agricultural wage employment (World Bank, 2007, Table 9.2). Taken together, these data imply that most rural women in MENA countries work primarily as unpaid family labour on male-controlled farms, which is consistent with the findings of many case studies. Nonetheless, women in MENA countries commonly earn small and at times substantial sums (sometimes hidden from their husbands) by selling milk, butter, chickens and eggs (Fernandez & Mehdi, 2013; Augustin, Assad, & Jaziri, 2012); making and selling carpets (Benmebarek *et al.*, 2014); or by undertaking casual, seasonal agricultural wage labour (Bouzidi, El Nour, & Moumen, 2011) that is not captured in large-scale surveys that only request one occupation.

In this context, the recent emergence of female agricultural labour contractors and female wage labour groups in Syria is particularly significant as it puts money into rural women's hands, often for the first time. This raises important questions as to whether and how women's paid work is empowering. As Elson (1999) pointed out, 'participation in labour markets does not automatically empower women'. The extent to which this work is empowering depends on factors such as the *relative incomes* of men and women within the household, whether women's paid work is offset by decreases in their domestic/caring work (because men take over some of this work or women/men purchase labour-saving appliances), and men's and women's *relative employment status*. The latter is influenced by widespread practices of occupational segregation by gender that are determined by social norms, values and beliefs that commonly undervalue women's productive work and legitimise their relegation to lower status, casual, manual work while men predominate in managerial and more skilled jobs. Wage differentials for work of comparable value (even in countries with equal pay legislation) also generally discriminate against women. While these social norms, values and practices, and the gender ideologies they embody often shift in interaction with economic change processes, the consequences for women's employment and empowerment are complex and not necessarily advantageous to women (Dey de Pryck & Termine, 2014). In order to explore these issues in a specific agricultural and socio-economic context, this paper draws on field research in northwest Syria as follows:

- (1) Identify the forces driving the emergence of female labour contractors and labour groups.
- (2) Examine these groups' characteristics, work conditions and wages and compare male and female contractors' recruitment and management styles, scale of operation, and returns.
- (3) Assess and compare the outcomes for female contractors' and labourers' empowerment.

2 FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN SYRIA

2.1 Traditional Organisation of Agricultural Labour

In traditional smallholder systems, male household heads controlled family labour and the product/income. This was the case in both the pre-1958 Land Reform period when many were sharecroppers and in the post-Reform period when they became smallholders with individual land titles. Historically and still today, rural women have little control of agricultural land and other assets, despite their rights to inherit or purchase land under civil and Islamic law. They often cede their inheritance rights to their brothers to put moral pressure on them for support should their husbands divorce them (Abdelali-Martini,

Salahieh, & Hamed, 2009). Urban women sometimes own agricultural land, although a male relative will usually manage it. Nonetheless, women in smallholder families undertake a large share of the agricultural work, which is commonly regarded as one of their unpaid domestic duties and not 'productive work'.

Poor families have always supplemented their livelihoods with wage labour. In the pre-Reform and early years of the post-Reform periods, landlords hired some labourers individually, although the prevalent practice was to hire men and their families,² with the men supervising their families' labour and controlling their wages.

2.2 Change Processes and the Feminisation of Agricultural Labour

Women's share of Syria's agricultural labour force increased from 31.7 per cent in 1980 to 60.7 per cent in 2010 (Table 1), doubling in just 30 years. A major reason was the transformation spurred by Syria's agricultural intensification programme. Initiated in 1975 (AOAD, 1975), this included large-scale land reclamation projects, new labour-intensive crops, productivity-enhancing technologies, irrigation development, particularly during the 1990s, and mechanisation, especially since 2000. These developments entailed changes in labour requirements that, mediated by the gender division of labour and social and family roles in rural Syria, resulted in gender-asymmetric changes in labour supply and demand. Demand for male labour fell dramatically because the operations that were mechanised were almost exclusively for male tasks, while labour demand remained stable or increased for women's manual, labour-intensive tasks (planting, weeding, harvesting legumes and vegetables, and caring for small livestock). The simultaneous expansion of the construction and industrial sectors in Syria and neighbouring countries provided rural men, especially young single men, with opportunities for better paid work. Male household heads (sometimes assisted by one or two household men) remained to run their farms, preserving the traditional social system. Their womenfolk continued to work on-farm as unpaid family labour and/or to engage increasingly in agricultural wage labour in Syria and/or abroad (Abdelali-Martini & Hamza, 2012).

Northwest Syria typifies these trends and the emergence of female labour groups. As rural families are increasingly confronted with the need for money, the social stigma against women's work outside the home is waning, and even women from better off families are undertaking agricultural wage labour.³ Nonetheless, traditional social values have shaped the way in which female work groups have evolved as a socially acceptable mechanism for women's paid work in a culture that customarily secludes women from non-family men. Thus, while labour contractors were predominantly male in the 1990s, providing continuity with the earlier male-led 'family labour gangs', with increasing male out-migration, female labour groups have replaced these mixed family groups, and the number of women contractors has steadily increased.

²These family labour groups included their children.

³Women's growing involvement in wage labour is most likely a response to long-term impoverishment as a result of a number of factors, including fragmentation of land holdings because of population growth and the Islamic inheritance system, rather than short-term economic shocks. The fact that women from better off families also do wage labour suggests that this is not (primarily) distress work but brings other valued (non-economic) benefits too, as we discuss in the succeeding texts.

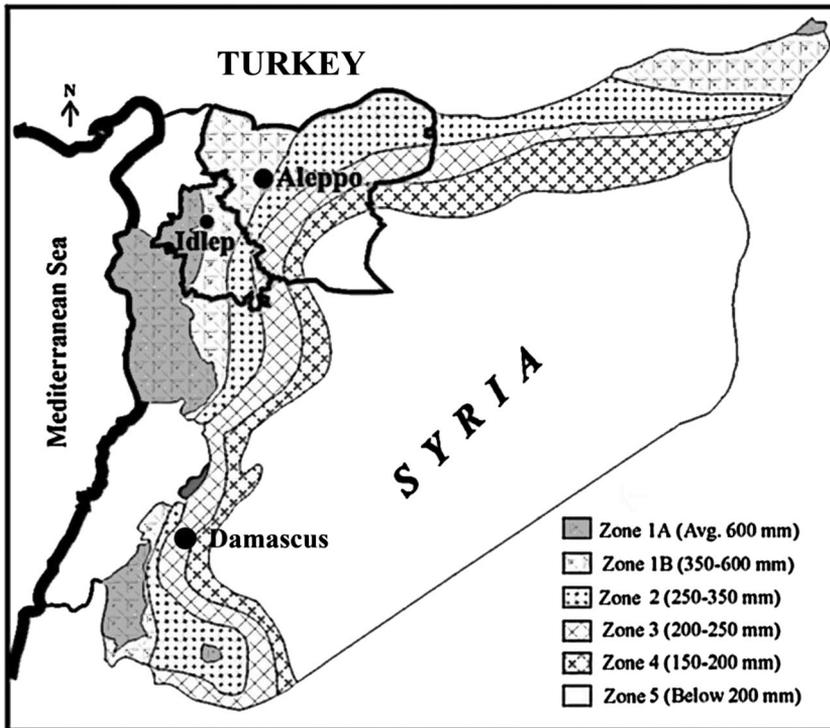


Figure 1. Study area in Northwest Syria, including rainfall zones

3 STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

The study was undertaken in the Aleppo and Idlib Governorates in northwest Syria (Figure 1)⁴ and builds on research conducted between 1994 and 2000 on the impact of agricultural intensification on women's agricultural work that identified the emergence of female wage labour groups, recruited and led by male or female contractors (Abdelali-Martini, Goldey, Jones, & Bailey, 2003). To explore this phenomenon in more depth, additional field work was undertaken in 2003 and 2011. Qualitative methods were selected as these are more flexible and sensitive than quantitative household or farm surveys for exploring subtle and nuanced social issues such as changing gender-related norms and agency, especially in a culture where men are very reluctant to divulge their womenfolk's paid employment because of the socially degrading implication that they cannot provide for their families. This supplementary qualitative work was therefore largely based on structured interviews, enriched with insights from participatory observation.

⁴Wheat-based systems predominate in the higher rainfall areas where the average precipitation is more than 350 mm a year (zone 1), while zone 2 (averaging 250–350 mm a year) and zone 3 (200–250 mm a year) are characterised by mixed farming and barley–livestock systems respectively. In the last two decades, the growing use of irrigation (particularly in low rainfall areas) and productivity-enhancing agricultural inputs (especially in high rainfall and irrigated areas) has modified these systems by permitting longer growing seasons, intensification of production and diversification into new labour-intensive crops such as sugar beet, cotton and potatoes, slightly blurring the boundaries between the three zones.

Interviews with key informants (local leaders, teachers and farmers), conducted in agroecological zones 1B and 2 of both Governorates, explored the major agricultural change processes and identified issues for an in-depth investigation with contractors and workers. Sixty contractors were interviewed, 20 per cent of whom were women. Seventy per cent of the contractors were permanent, while the others combined part-time labour contracting with other work in Syria and, in a few cases, in Lebanon and/or Jordan. The interviews recorded contractors' life histories and explored their methods of negotiating contracts with farmers and recruiting, organising, supervising and remunerating their workers. Some 200 women workers participated in group discussions about their work activities and conditions, wage rates, and control over and use of their income.

4 THE ORGANISATION OF FEMALE LABOUR GROUPS

4.1 Types of Labour Arrangements

Smallholder agriculture in northwest Syria relies largely on family labour, supplemented by labour exchange (*faz'a*) between relatives, for field and post-harvest activities. However, in her 1996 farm household survey in 46 villages, Abdelali-Martini found that 67 per cent of the households also hired labourers (Abdelali-Martini *et al.*, 2003, Table 6). While around 80 per cent of the households cultivating more than 20 ha and 71 per cent of those with 8 to 20 ha relied heavily on wage labour, it was surprising that as many as 51 per cent of farmers with less than 8 ha also hired labour. A large share of this labour was for harvesting legumes⁵ in May when there was a very small 'window' to gather in the crops, particularly lentils, which easily shatter. A higher percentage of farms hired labour in the more intensive systems in Zone 1, where hired labour was needed for at least 10 months a year.

In 1996 and 2011, farmers used three types of hired labour,⁶ either alternatively or in combination: (i) direct hiring of individual workers on annual contracts (*a'mel sanawi*), mainly for irrigation and supervisory activities, or casual daily workers (*'ummal*) for ploughing, herbicide application and harvesting; (ii) direct arrangements between farmers and labour groups, mediated by the groups' leaders; and (iii) arrangements between farmers and labour contractors (*chaweesh/mu'alim*) who recruited and supervised labour gang workers (*f'ull* within *shaddeh*—'workers within a group').

4.2 Labour Group Characteristics

While similar agricultural labour groups existed in other parts of Syria, those in the northwest were sometimes hired to work in Jordan and Lebanon. More than half the groups were permanent, while occasional groups were constituted during peak labour demand periods: in April–May for weeding and harvesting legumes and weeding crops such as potatoes and sugar beet and in October–November for the olive harvest. Groups ranged in size from large (50–300 workers) to 'standard' and small, with 20–40 and 10–15 workers respectively. A standard group was a cost-effective size for a single contractor to manage.

⁵The main legumes cultivated in the area are lentils, chickpeas and faba beans.

⁶Contracts are all verbal.

Table 2. Example of labour group membership

Age group (years)	Female individuals		Male individuals		Total	%
	Single	Married	Single	Married		
15–20	48				48	69
21–25		6	6		12	17
26–30		5			5	9
31–50		5			5	6
Total	48	16	6		70	100

2011

Large groups either worked as a single unit on large holdings or were divided into smaller groups to work on different plots or small farms.

The contractors came from the local communities and were mature (usually over 50 years old) and respected persons, so local families were comfortable entrusting their womenfolk to work in the contractors' gangs, even in other villages or abroad. Contractors usually maintained a number of client farmers with whom they made verbal agreements. The contractors decided the number of workers to hire, whether to work on one or more farms at the same time, and specifically whom to hire and for which farm. Workers had no direct relationship with farmers and were supervised by their contractor or his/her delegated supervisor.⁷ This system gave the contractors complete control over the local labour market that enabled them to respond to multiple demands simultaneously, especially for lentil harvesting, while guaranteeing work for themselves and their groups.

Drawn from poor farming and landless households, most of the workers were women with little or no education. In 2003, the workers' ages ranged between 9 and 78 years old, even though Syrian legislation prohibited the employment of children under the age of 12. Four or five girls or boys were found in each group of 30 to 40 labourers. Some progress was observed in 2011, as the youngest workers were 13–14 years old, because of stricter enforcement of compulsory schooling laws. The groups primarily consisted of young unmarried women aged 15–20 years old and a few married women, widows, and divorcées.⁸ Although in 1996 and 2003, the labour groups were almost exclusively female workers, in 2011, the groups included a small number of men (Table 2). This could be a temporary phenomenon because of the political turmoil in Syria⁹ that had repercussions throughout the labour market, resulting in exceptionally high agricultural wage rates.

⁷The contractors normally determine the work schedule, allocate tasks and supervise the workers directly or through their supervisors. The exception appears to be for workers harvesting olives who spend the entire period near their work, and because their wages (cash or in kind) depend on the quantity of olives they harvest, they organise their own work schedule, often working for a very long day.

⁸This reflected similar findings in Egypt where most of the female agricultural labourers were young, single women. In Morocco, however, more than half the female labourers were married (a requirement also for Moroccan female contract workers in Spanish strawberry farms), while in Tunisia, marriage status and age were less important than the families' socio-economic conditions (Bouzidi *et al.*, 2011).

⁹Although the political turmoil in Syria started in 2010, at the time of the field work in 2011, the unrest was largely confined to certain cities, and Aleppo itself was still unaffected. Life in the rural areas near Aleppo was also normal. The situation has subsequently deteriorated very seriously (especially from the beginning of 2013), and it is not safe to go to the rural areas where many farms have been taken over by armed gangs. It is hoped to carry out comparative research on these gender issues in the same area once peace has been restored to see what changes have taken place (if any) and why.

4.3 Comparing Male and Female Contractors' Labour Groups

The 2011 interviews suggested a female/male ratio among the labour contractors of about 40 to 60. Interviewees indicated that the number and proportion of women contractors had increased considerably between 1996 and 2011 as male contractors left for better paid non-agricultural work. Furthermore, the women workers' families increasingly preferred their daughters and daughters-in-law to work with female labour contractors and supervisors rather than with their male colleagues, even if the latter were considered very trustworthy within the village. Women workers also expressed their enthusiasm and preference to be contracted and supervised by a woman. Female contractors usually led groups of less than 40 women, while men's groups ranged from 10 to 300 workers. By 2011, many large male contractors had established office-based 'workers' agencies' where access to computerised accounting systems greatly improved efficiency.¹⁰

Large contractors used subcontractors/supervisors, mainly their relatives, to help manage their groups. This reliance on relatives enhanced trust and the groups' social acceptability. The number of female supervisors increased steadily since 1996 and represented about half of the supervisors in 2011. Even male contractors preferred female supervisors who were easier to manage. As a contractor explained, 'they will not work against him'. Male supervisors, who were more independent and mobile, sometimes created unwelcome competition by recruiting their own gangs after learning the business and developing contacts with farmers. Women workers also preferred working for women supervisors or contractors who were more supportive vis-à-vis their health or family problems.

4.4 Wage Rates

Table 3 shows a marked increase in wage rates between 1996 and 2011. Using time series trends, we found an average annual increase of 4.5 per cent, which is approximately double the annual inflation rates of 2 to 3 per cent recorded in Syria's inflation price index for the period 1990–2010. Workers therefore enjoyed a *real* wage increase, largely because of increased labour demand with intensification of production combined with reduced labour supply as men exited agriculture and, in 2011, the growing political turmoil. Women's average annual income in 2011 ranged from 15 000 SP (300 US\$) to 30 000 SP (638 US\$) for 5 and 8 months' work respectively. However, wage rates for female tasks compared unfavourably with those for men's mechanised operations that reflected large skill and productivity margins, as well as for men's unskilled non-agricultural work that commanded about 60 SP/hour in 1996 and 75–80 SP/hour in 2011, with rates for skilled work increasing from about 125–155 SP/hour in 1996 to 185–250 SP/hour in 2011.¹¹

Contractors' daily rates also increased from 10–25 SP per worker in 1996 to 60–70 SP in 2011, with their average daily earnings doubling from 300–750 SP in 1996 to 600–1500 SP in 2011. Large contractors earned between 243 000 and 270 000 SP (5585–6428 US\$) annually in 1996 and 500 000 SP (10 638 US\$) in 2011. Female contractors, operating on a

¹⁰Based in their new offices, large contractors and their financial staff could reap the benefits of computerised accounting systems. For example, since the workers were casual and their wages varied by season, crop or operation, they were given cards on which their supervisors recorded the specific days worked and operations performed. This system facilitated control of absences and the computerised calculation of wages that were paid at the end of the work period.

¹¹In 1996, US\$1 = 42 SP; in 2011, US\$1 = 47 SP.

Table 3. Wage rates in 1996 and 2011 (SP/h)^a

Operation ^b	1996	2011
Individual labour (mechanised)		
Ploughing and harvesting cereals ^d	67–167	200–500
Combine harvesting ^d		
Driver	43–86	114–143
Worker ^c	200	500
Irrigation ^e	30	72
Pruning trees (manual) ^d	100	294
Group work (manual)		
Harvesting lentils ^f	20–55	60
Weeding and thinning crops ^f	25–30	40–44
Picking cotton ^f	20	40
Picking olives ^f	25	50
Selecting potatoes ^f	16–25	25
Supervision by sublabour contractor/ supervisor ^b	54	63–78

^aIn 1996, US\$1 = 42 SP; in 2011, US\$1 = 47 SP.

^bRefer to Appendix Table 1 for details.

^cTwo workers needed.

^dMen.

^eWomen and men.

^fWomen.

smaller scale, estimated their annual earnings at 35 000–70 000 SP (833–1666 US\$) in 1996 and 120 000 SP (2553 US\$) in 2011.

4.5 Working and Transportation Conditions

Contractors are responsible for recording the workers' names and for their transportation, supervision and payments. While much of the work is carried out in the labourers' own or nearby villages, especially for small groups, considerable improvements in roads over recent years have facilitated labour movements. Workers from the Maarat al-Nu'man and Jabal Sam'an districts in Idlib Governorate, for example, travel 50–60 km to spend several weeks of olive picking in Afrin and Azaz districts of Aleppo Governorate.

Safety is a serious issue, both during transportation¹² and in the field.¹³ Because agreements between contractors and farmers and between contractors and workers are *informal*, these health risks escape the control by labour inspectors who anyway rarely visit the rural areas.¹⁴ Contractors generally attempt to conceal accidents or injuries from the authorities, providing basic medical or other assistance when needed. Deaths or serious injuries are harder to conceal, and contractors usually compensate the families to avoid court action.

¹²Contractors generally transport groups working in nearby villages in trailers attached to a tractor or a *trezineh*, a three-wheeled vehicle. For more distant work, workers travel in trucks and are given very basic accommodation by the farmers, either in the village or near the fields. The labourers have to stand in the trailers or trucks, often a hazardous practice.

¹³Labourers work without gloves or masks when harvesting manually (the rainfed areas are very dusty at harvest time) or protective clothing when applying pesticides and work for hours with bent backs.

¹⁴Syria's Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) legislation is not properly implemented or enforced. The 1958 Agricultural Relations Law is out of date. Although some amendments were made in 2006, mainly concerning contractual relations between landowners and tenant farmers, the legislation remains deficient with regard to workers' rights and OHS.

5 EMPOWERMENT OF FEMALE CONTRACTORS AND LABOURERS

Empowerment is a multidimensional concept that has eluded a commonly agreed definition.¹⁵ Because the concept covers broad (interrelated) economic, psychological, sociocultural and political dimensions of empowerment, substantial efforts are now underway to refine strategies and methods to promote and measure women's empowerment in *agriculture*. Of particular importance is the recent Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index.¹⁶

Taking as our starting point Sen's (1985) concept of *agency* as 'what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important', we focus on empowerment as 'expansion of agency'. This involves considering predisposing sociocultural, economic and institutional conditions that enable or restrict people's ability to exert agency fruitfully—that is, to act on their individual or collective choices. We also view empowerment as a continuum, ranging from emergence from isolation at one end to participation in the public sphere at the other.¹⁷

Our analysis of the empowerment outcomes for labour contractors and workers is organised around our adaptation of Rowlands' (1997) typology of power or agency:

- power from within (change)—growing self-awareness, confidence, assertiveness, motivation, and a desire for change that can influence individuals to make/strive for change (even if they fail);
- power to do or to withdraw or withhold cooperation (choice)—growing individual capacities, especially through sharpening needed knowledge, know-how and skills, opportunities to access economic/agricultural resources and social contacts/networks, to make decisions, exercise authority and solve problems;
- power over (control)—changes in access to underlying agricultural resources (including labour, jobs and income) and power relations and the ability to benefit from these new opportunities and/or overcome power inequalities and constraints; and
- power with (community)—collaboration, solidarity, shared vision and goals, and joint action with others, including challenging social norms and practices, negotiating to tackle constraints or abuses, and action to defend common interests.

5.1 Power From Within (Change)

Empowerment in terms of greater self-confidence and assertiveness was limited by the persistence of gender ideologies that ascribed men the bread-winning role and women a lower status dependent role. Thus, both men and women regarded women's incomes as *supplementary, even if women earned more than their husbands*. In practice, most female

¹⁵Refer to Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007, and Kabeer, 2012, for reviews of different definitions, and in Kabeer's case, the discussion of empowerment concepts in the context of wage labour markets and enterprise development.

¹⁶The pioneering Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) offers a set of tools for using individual-level quantitative data obtained by interviewing men and women in the same households. Because agency and empowerment are experienced with respect to different tasks and can be described and measured with respect to different domains, the WEAI uses five domains of empowerment in agriculture: production, resources, incomes, leadership and time (for details, refer to Alkire *et al.*, 2012). Our paper, which focuses on labour contractors and workers, covers only a component aspect of the five WEAI domains.

¹⁷James-Sebro (2005), cited in Meinzen-Dick *et al.* (2014), defines gender equality in four stages: (i) engagement of women to come out of isolation; (ii) empowerment through acquired ideas, knowledge, skills, and resources; (iii) enhancement of lives in households and communities; and (iv) emergence into the public sphere.

workers' and some contractors' earnings were lower than men's, reflecting the large gender inequalities in earnings in Syria as a whole, where the ratio of estimated female to male earned income was only 0.29 (UNDP, 2005, Table 26).¹⁸ Women's lower earnings and the labelling of their incomes as 'supplementary' were not threatening to men socially or psychologically. As one woman who earned more than her husband explained, '*the "shade" of her husband was worth all the treasure in the world*'. In other words, his presence and implicit support provided a social legitimacy for her work outside the home.

Women were proud of their work and earnings and felt an increased sense of self-worth because they had some say over the way their wages were spent, even though this was limited to basic household expenditures. Some husbands or fathers expressed privately their appreciation of women's earnings but were ashamed to admit publically their inability to provide for their families.

Surprisingly, the predominant tendency was that, despite their wages and greater self-confidence, women's greatest aspiration for their daughters remained the traditional norm—that they should marry well-off men and concentrate on their domestic roles. A few women aspired to break from these norms, wishing that their daughters could be better educated and even find work outside the home. However, they perceived this as an unattainable dream because there were no secondary schools in their own or neighbouring villages and social taboos precluded girls from travelling further afield for schooling or from going to mixed sex schools. In contrast, they hoped that their sons (as future breadwinners and household heads) could receive more education (even if the schools were in other villages or towns) in order to obtain higher paid non-agricultural jobs.

While female contractors and labourers came from the same socio-economic backgrounds, the contractors were distinguished by their leadership skills, maturity and the confidence that they inspired. Many female contractors started as workers and were promoted to subcontractor/supervisor before they became independent contractors. Others started by helping their fathers or mothers before taking over their businesses, an apprenticeship that gave them greater legitimacy and an established clientele.

It was often easier for men to become established, in part because they had considerably more relevant work experience. For example, Abu Mar'i from El-Bab, one of the major labour-supplying districts, explained that he had previously worked as a 'murabii'¹⁹ (sharecropper), managing a farm for its owner, undertaking some agricultural operations and advising the owner on production and marketing matters. He also stressed as valued benefits the autonomy and independence that contracting brings both men and women labour bosses:

'I was responsible for hiring and supervising workers for the farmer, which was a good preparation for my current job. After three years of hard work, I decided to become a labour contractor so I could manage my life independently of the farmer. My wife, Um Mar'i, and my sons worked with me, gaining valuable experience that enabled them to set up later as independent labour bosses.'

Most male and female contractors had at most completed primary education; illiterate contractors had no problem managing money and often asked their daughters to record the workers' names. While some women's husbands or sons helped them negotiate with

¹⁸The original source is the UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, Table 26, whose estimates were based on data for the most recent year available during 1991–2003.

¹⁹In Syria, a *murabii* is entitled to one-quarter of the total net return on the farm production.

farmers, most women drove a hard bargain to ensure that their wage rates were competitive with their male colleagues' rates.²⁰

The work itself gave contractors opportunities to develop their leadership, management and negotiation skills. Some women contractors revealed that they had to fight for recognition by farmers and male contractors because contracting was regarded as a male domain, and it took time to gain acceptance and build their businesses. Influenced by gender ideologies that it was 'devaluing' and 'shameful' for men to do 'women's work', some male contractors argued that women only led small groups because of innate female limitations. Such attempts to denigrate women suggest that some men felt threatened by women's increasing competition and share of the business.

Despite these patriarchal social norms and attitudes, the female labour contractors and supervisors we interviewed exhibited not only an impressive 'power from within' to engage in the challenging process of establishing themselves as labour bosses but also the self-confidence and independent judgement to develop their own distinct, more feminine management style. This was reflected in the words of Um Kasser, a successful female labour contractor from the Jabal Sam'an district:

'I was a young housewife and mother when Haja Rahmeh (my sister-in-law) became a labour boss. When my children grew up, I started working as an agricultural worker. After a few years, I decided to work on my own as a labour boss, with Haja's guidance. At the beginning, I visited five or six women in Batabu (my village) suggesting that they work with me. Throughout this early period, I was still exploring whether I could be successful as a labour boss. Later on (supported by my husband) and after proving that I was qualified to organise and supervise agricultural labour, I became well known in the village, and the number of workers in my gang increased. The secret of being successful in this type of work is to be kind to the workers. By treating them well, they liked me, a nice relationship was established, and I was able to compete with other labour bosses in mobilising a large number of workers.'

Um Kasser believed that paying workers on time also strengthened her relationship with them. Her ability to create a comfortable working atmosphere within her gang and her fair and kind treatment of the workers contributed to making her one of the most respected and successful labour gang leaders in the village. Later on, she became well known in the surrounding rural areas, and farmers from other villages started to hire labour through her. This contracting work brings its own intrinsic rewards, as Um Kasser explained:

'I appreciate my work because I am paid better than the workers of the gang without having to work like them. Despite the heavy responsibility of supervising the whole gang, I feel less tired when I go back home.'

5.2 Power to Do or to Withhold Cooperation (Choice)

Women contractors and labourers were not completely free to enter this wage labour market; the decisions were usually taken together with male family members and were largely driven by the need for additional income. As women put it, they work 'not for gold, or fine clothes, but so that our families can eat'. Young women were particularly dependent

²⁰Women do not form a homogenous group. Thus, female contractors could not conceive of 'making common cause' with the female labourers to try to raise wage rates, as they were themselves competing with male contractors who were often more experienced, and farmers whose priority was to keep labour costs as low as possible.

on their fathers' approval, as illustrated by the contractors' lists of workers that sometimes recorded only the fathers' names.

Although under Syrian law, men and women are entitled to receive equal wages²¹ for the same work, women were generally confined to less skilled, traditional female jobs, while men filled the better paid jobs operating machinery, driving trucks or riding bicycles, which were culturally unacceptable for rural women. Thus, women's work was not in itself empowering. However, they valued other benefits that the work brought, and afraid that they would lose their jobs to men if these were mechanised, many women asked the interviewer to discourage efforts to mechanise their work, particularly the well-paid lentil harvesting.

Female contractors have less *power* to expand their businesses than men because of their domestic, caring work and social constraints on travelling alone or using motorcycles to visit more distant farms. So, women generally depend on a small number of local farmers who approach them directly for workers whom the women recruit locally. This arrangement and the growing use of mobile phones to negotiate contracts enable women to maintain the prestige that they (and their families) gain if they work from home. By choosing not to challenge the social *status quo*, women have developed business methods that bring some degree of empowerment without adopting men's more flexible methods.

The case of Ammoun illustrates the heterogeneity of labour boss-supervisor relationships and the way that they can affect a woman's *power to do* or *withhold cooperation*. A young, unmarried woman aged about 28 years old, Ammoun lived with her parents in the Jabal Sam'an district. She led and supervised 30 women workers in her father's gang, also working with them. She arranged transportation to other villages about 60 km away for work, travelling alone with the gang. With a strong personality, she gave loud, firm orders to her workers. She had a clear strategy for organising the work:

'I place workers to "ride"²² rows of lentils, I place adults on two rows, and children on one row of lentils. While harvesting cumin, I place adults on four rows of cumin and children on two rows.²³

She imposed firm but subtle discipline on her workers. For example, she sometimes asked the farmers to work on a 'qabala' basis when the contractor estimated and agreed with the farmer the volume of work that could be completed by the end of the working day. This encouraged the workers to stop talking and increase their working speed so they could go home earlier. She also discouraged her workers from bringing breakfast with them as she considered that their performance declined after eating breakfast.

Despite running her father's labour gang and working in the fields with the women, Ammoun received the same wage as the workers, while her absent father was paid 10 SP per day per worker. As a young, unmarried woman, she was socially obliged to live with her parents, and her earnings were spent on family household expenses. This meant that

²¹Although under Syrian law, women and men are entitled to receive the same wage for performing the same type of work, women and men agricultural workers generally perform distinct types of work. However, they are paid the same wage if they perform the same activity, for example, when they work within a group of family members. Most of the work performed by women within the labour gangs is manual and the wage is fixed. We found a few men working within the gangs (especially when they belong to the same family), and they were paid the same wage rate as women for doing the same work. This distinguishes practices in Syria compared with other countries such as Tunisia where women are paid half men's wages for performing the same activity.

²²Translated literally from Arabic, 'riding' a row or rows means following a row when planting, weeding or harvesting.

²³The local expression 'barkab khattein'adas' means being placed to work on two rows of lentils. This term is used in agriculture in relation to harvest, planting or weeding operations where workers plant and harvest *rows* of the crop; they say that they 'ride the row'.

she had no bargaining power to demand a higher wage from her father for carrying out his work, and she had no exit opportunities either, such as leaving home. Interestingly, Ammoon did not question the fairness of her situation or express aspirations to be more independent. Her aspirations might change if she marries. Meanwhile, she was proud of her leadership skills and the respect with which her parents, workers, farmers and co-labour bosses and supervisors treated her.

In-depth interviews with women contractors and workers revealed that their incomes had not given them the *power to* ask their husbands to help with domestic or caring work nor to withhold their labour on the family farm, to free up their time for wage labour.²⁴ More investigation is needed to ascertain whether this wage labour substitutes for leisure and/or has costs, for example, in terms of child care and nutrition.

5.3 Power Over (Control)

Almost 70 per cent of the labourers controlled their income,²⁵ while in the other cases, it was controlled by the women's husbands or fathers. Because of poverty, the wages were mainly spent on food, children's education, clothes and, especially by young unmarried workers, on their trousseaus. They sometimes bought cheese, pickles and jam to save time making these themselves. Apart from having a little more say over small household expenditures, their wages gave them a sense of more economic autonomy although it brought them only modest economic empowerment. For example, none of the women saved money to invest in her own microbusiness or buy domestic appliances to reduce drudgery or free up her time for wage labour or leisure.

Some female contractors invested in their own businesses, such as small ruminant rearing. More commonly, they invested in enlarging their houses with additional rooms for their married children. However, as no houses were registered in women's names, these investments were scarcely empowering. Few women aspired to own property or build their own businesses.²⁶

5.4 Power With (Community)

Women workers referred to their work as '*tislaya wa tihlaya*' meaning working, getting paid and being entertained at the same time. Despite the tediousness of the work itself (the work in itself is not empowering), women valued the opportunity to joke and share work and life experiences with other women as much as their wages that gave them more

²⁴In larger, often multigenerational families, the women arrange among themselves for one or two women to take care of the children and domestic chores, and the wages are shared among them all.

²⁵The data indicate that the women labourers were from very poor households, a reason why they accepted this work despite social norms dictating that women should only work within the homestead boundaries. Because most of the men were unable to find enough work in or near their villages, especially in rainfed areas, and were forced to migrate for extended periods for better paid non-agricultural work, women had more opportunity to control their income and have more say in managing the household and farm.

²⁶Development projects in Syria's Jabal El-Hoss area that provided women financial assets to start their own businesses had very limited success. Many husbands used the money for their own purposes, while a few started businesses with the grants given to their wives who seemed contented to contribute (unpaid) assistance in running these businesses (Abdelali-Martini, 2011).

economic autonomy.²⁷ Coming from a culture of seclusion, the work brought them into contact with women from other families whom they would not normally have met. This increased their sense of sharing common problems, joys and aspirations, opening their narrow worlds to new information, experiences, perspectives, networks and friendships. Working together, often in relatively hard physical conditions, brought a new and unimagined sense of solidarity among the women. Although in 2011, they had not even considered building on this solidarity to form a more organised mechanism to negotiate better work conditions and wages, such growing solidarity could potentially develop into more proactive joint economic and social activities and demands in the future.

Because women play marginal, largely silent roles in community or agricultural organisations, these labour groups constitute a new and promising form of social capital. They typify a key element of social capital stressed by Narayan and Cassidy (2001)—*trust*: among workers, between workers and contractors, and between contractors and farmers. This is fundamental to their success in a culture where trust is a core value in social and economic exchange and where farmers and contractors commit *verbally* to significant cash payments and production targets. The groups are informal and are not registered with the Labour Authorities, and the women are not unionised. They operate on trust within a traditional environment where workers are not only unaware of their labour rights but also unlikely to challenge the social order and advance their empowerment.²⁸ However, as more women join these work gangs, their growing presence in the public domain and the appreciation of their work by both the farmers and their families are likely to reinforce the social legitimacy of their work outside the home and contribute to changing the restrictive social norms and practices of seclusion.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Women's increasing role in Syrian agriculture as a result of economic change processes has been accommodated without challenging gender power relations or bringing transformative change. Most farm women continue to work as unpaid family labour performing traditional female tasks. The emergence of female labour contractors and labour groups as the dominant mechanism for supplying wage labour in northwest Syria has entailed a modest evolution in social norms in a culture that idealises women's segregation in the home.²⁹ However, these

²⁷This echoes the preference of South African women agricultural workers for women-only work teams as they 'got along' better without men present (Kritzinger & Vorster, 1996).

²⁸With the increasing mobility of some groups to Jordan and Lebanon, women workers are likely to learn from the experiences of similar groups in negotiating for better work conditions although it may be some years before they have the skills and self-confidence to negotiate on their own behalf.

²⁹These labour groups also represent a new form of social capital. In this context, it is useful to recall Meinzen-Dick *et al.* (2013): 'Strengthening social capital can affect gender relations at four levels: relations within the household, relations within the collective action group itself, relations of the group vis-à-vis the community, and relations of the community vis-à-vis the outside.' Because the degree of empowerment depends on where the women were along the continuum when these labour groups emerged, it is important to note that the women contractors and workers started off at the low (unempowered) end of the continuum where they were largely isolated in their homes. Most of the gains in empowerment were within the household although these were modest. The relations within the group were largely social because the women did not attempt to claim better working conditions or wages. The relations of the groups vis-à-vis the community were modestly empowering to the extent that it became socially acceptable for women to work outside their homes for male and female contractors on male farmers' land, while the female contractors gained prestige and empowerment by negotiating contracts with farmers in their own or more distant communities. Relations vis-à-vis the outside were very limited, except for contractors/groups that worked much further afield in Syria or in Jordan and Lebanon. However, these were still limited to relations with contractors and farmers and not the public sphere.

female workers have not taken over men's work (which has been largely mechanised) but perform traditional female tasks that are manual, repetitive and paid well below male wage rates for unskilled work. They have casual, verbal contracts, with no security of employment or social benefits, and often endure poor and unsafe working conditions. While both contractors and labourers have some say over how their wages are used, these are mainly spent on basic household goods,³⁰ and because gender ideologies regard women's incomes as 'supplementary' (even for contractors earning more than their husbands), their empowerment is very limited. Nonetheless, the women valued their work because it brought them companionship with other women and self-esteem that their earnings improved their families' lives, while the contractors developed leadership skills and respect within the community.

This situation is not static: If female jobs were mechanised, for cultural and economic reasons, they would almost certainly be taken over by men with negative consequences for women's employment and empowerment. Policy makers and scientists therefore need to weigh up carefully the benefits or losses before embarking on such developments. Similarly, although Syrian labour legislation and occupational health and safety regulations need updating and enforcing in the agricultural sector, policy makers and labour inspectors need to take account of the risks that such reforms could substantially increase female wage labour costs, kept artificially low in the current informal labour market, providing farmers incentives to mechanise.³¹ Thus, technological and labour policies need careful design, implementation and monitoring, so corrective measures can be taken rapidly if necessary.

It would not be *just* to promote a two-track development, with men in the faster track with more skilled, better paid jobs and women in a slower, lower status track, largely performing manual work. Programmes are needed to build rural women's technical and business skills including in agricultural value-addition activities; increase their access to productive assets, education, information, communication tools, and services; and strengthen their membership and leadership roles in collective organisations such as cooperatives and business and worker organisations. Public and private sector investment in rural non-farm enterprises can also generate socially acceptable work for women and, by increasing demand for their labour, have a positive effect on their wage rates and work conditions. In view of the strong ideologies about gender roles, rights and responsibilities in rural Syria, it will be vital to convince male community leaders of the benefits of gender equity and women's income-earning activities and to work in partnership with gender-sensitive leaders.

ABBREVIATIONS

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
ICARDA	International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas
ILO	International Labour Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

³⁰This is also because of the acute poverty in the drylands that was a key driver in pushing women to work outside the household's boundaries.

³¹For example, lentil straw provides an essential component of animal feed and is an important soil nutrient. Mechanised harvesting of lentils is likely to destroy these economically valuable benefits.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Agricultural wages paid in the study area in 1996 and 2011

	1996	2011
Length of working day and average wage/hour	Wage/Day/Labour = 5 h	Wage = 8.5 h at an average of 35 SP/hour + 5 SP/hour cost of transport and payment of labour boss
Individual labour		
Ploughing 1 ha of land (mechanised) ^a	400 SP/ha in rainfed land and 1000 SP /ha on irrigated land	1600 SP/ha in rainfed land and 4000 SP/ha on irrigated land (ploughing and drilling) Two operations for rainfed and four operations for irrigated
Harvesting cereals with combine (mechanised) ^a	4–7% ^d of production or a fixed amount per hectare	8% of production on rainfed/4–5% on irrigated
Irrigation (two persons) ^b	4000 SP/month	15 000SP/labour/month for 3–4 months or 500 SP/day/labour; usually one person from family and one hired (surface or sprinkler)
Threshing (mechanised) ^a	Three hired labours/15–20 SP/ labour/h	Three hired labours/50 SP/labour/ hour
Pruning trees (manual) ^a SP/day	500 SP/day	25–50 SP/tree—small/big One person can prune 100 small trees/day
Labour within labour gangs		

(Continues)

Table A1. (Continued)

	1996	2011
Harvesting lentils (manual) ^c SP/day	100–275	490 SP/worker (labour boss and transport cost 25% of total), 11 workers × 8.5 h for 1 ha
Selecting potato (manual) ^c , SP/day	80–125	Winter potato difficult; wage/hour 200 SP/day
Weeding and thinning any crop ^c (manual), SP/day	100–150 25 SP/h/labour, 5 h in the morning and 5 h in the afternoon	40 SP in 1 h/worker, 320–350 SP/day/labour (8 h)
Picking cotton (manual) ^c	100 SP/day or 3.25–3.50 SP/kg	6 SP/kg × 40 kg/day/worker for 5 h = 200–250 SP/day
Picking olives (manual) ^c	125 SP/day or 1/6, 1/7 or 1/8 of the production (olive oil) paid in kind	5 <i>tanakeh</i> of oil/worker = 801 of oil/25 days' work ^f
Planting (manual) ^c , SP/day	100–125	40 SP 1h/worker
Filling a cotton bag (manual) ^a	50 SP/bag × seven bags/day = 350 SP	75 SP/bag (175 kg) × seven bags/day = 525 SP
Khatra (trailer load) ^a	100 SP/ <i>khatra</i> × 60/day = 60 00SP/ha	500 SP/trailer/three men workers = 167 SP/worker
Digging a hole to plant a tree	20 SP/hole × 7/day = 140 SP/day	50–60 SP/hole, 10 holes/day/labour
Manual harvest of crops	40 SP/h/labour from 5:00 to 14:00 (9 h), 400–500 SP/labour/day	80 SP/h/labour, 600–700 SP/labour/day (8–9 h), best benefit of wages, tough job, could be split in two shifts, morning and afternoon
Labour boss	300–500 SP/day	12 000–15 000 SP/day, out from 150 labours (big gang) 10 SP/h/labour for different jobs during the season except for harvest could reach 25 SP/h/labour
Sublabour boss	30 SP/h	50 SP/h/sublabour boss 500–700 SP + 100 SP as extra tip paid by main boss/day(8–9 h)
Transportation of gangs, renting vehicles(two shifts, vehicle will stay till work is finished)	500 SP/day (30–35 labour) (8 h) Mostly by tractors/trailers and few with vehicles	1000–1200 SP/day for 10 h, upon distance (30–35 labour)/vehicle, mostly with vehicles/lorries, could go for 30–50 km far away

^aMen

^bWomen and men

^cWomen

^dThe drier the area, the lower the yield per hectare and the higher the percentage of production paid in kind.

^eWage rates for weeding increase when there are competing tasks, for example, harvesting other crops.

^fRanges between 4.5 and 7 *tanakeh* (*tanakeh* capacity = 161 of oil)/worker for 1 month or 50 SP/h/worker.