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# FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

## Thirty-sixth Session

10-13 January 2022 and 7-8 February 2022

## Gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment in the Near East and North Africa

### Executive Summary

Promoting gender equality is both a pre-condition and a catalyst for achieving the world's shared ambitions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including delivering resilient and inclusive agrifood systems. The purpose of this information note is to provide an overview of the main gender inequalities that persist in the agriculture and rural sector in some countries the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region, highlighting how women's unequal control over assets and resources, and their absence from relevant decision-making processes, hinder efforts to achieve agrifood systems and rural transformation. The note also provides some highlights of FAO's work in the region, in contribution to the Regional Priorities and the objectives set by the FAO Policy on Gender Equality 2020-2030. Finally, the note proposes a set of recommendations for the way forward, emphasizing the need to systematically adopt gender-transformative approaches to challenge the unequal power relations characterizing agrifood systems in the NENA region.

### Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference is invited to call upon Members to:

- Support the generation of data and statistics, disaggregated by gender, age and other relevant social dimensions, to inform evidence-based policy-making and programme development.
- Accelerate efforts to report on SDG indicators and targets relevant to gender and food systems, such as SDG 5 Indicator 5.a.1 and 5.a.2 on women's ownership of land.
- Continue to strengthen efforts to adopt policies and programmes that ensure gender and age-responsive rural and agrifood systems transformation, and overcome the setbacks brought about by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on different populations groups.
- Invest in reducing the gender digital divide to allow women, including young and rural women, to equally participate in and benefit from the increasing digitalization of agrifood systems.

- e) Foster policy and legal frameworks that ensure women's equal entitlements and control over assets (land in particular), resources and services, and provide incentives to enhance women's, particularly young women's, decent employment and entrepreneurship in agriculture and rural areas.
- f) Support the adoption of gender-transformative approaches, such as household methodologies and Farmer Field Schools, Farm Business Schools or Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools, which explicitly challenge unequal power relations and promote behavioural change through household and community mobilization.
- g) Promote policies and programmes aimed to reduce women's excessive work burden by providing gender-sensitive and labour-saving agricultural technologies, services and infrastructure, while promoting a more equitable distribution of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities at the household and community level.
- h) Foster policy coherence and invest in cross-sectoral interventions that allow tackling the underlying causes of gender equality in a synergistic manner by bringing together institutions and organizations working on different policy domains (education, reproductive health, employment, etc.) and from different constituencies (civil society, private sector, etc.).

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## Introduction

### I. Transforming agrifood systems requires transforming unequal gender relations

1. Across the NENA region, women play multiple roles in agrifood systems as producers, processors, and retailers in agrifood value chains. They also provide most of the “reproductive work” (i.e. childcare, food preparation, cleaning, etc.) essential to ensure the food security and nutrition of households and communities. Paradoxically, however, women are more vulnerable to food insecurity, malnutrition and to the impacts of the multiple shocks and crises affecting the region.
2. The reasons for this vulnerability lie in the unequal gender relations that characterize agrifood systems in some countries the region. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2021, the NENA region shows the widest gender gap. At the current rate of progress, it will take 142.4 years to close it.<sup>1</sup>
3. Other social dimensions, such as age, residency status, disability and socio-economic conditions interplay with gender to create marginalization and vulnerability. Younger women, widows, female heads of households, women among refugees and internally displaced people, and women living with disabilities, for example, experience more significant risk of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition, especially in countries affected by conflicts and protracted crises.
4. Across the region, women face legal and sociocultural barriers in their access to assets and resources. Women own less than 7 percent of agricultural land and female landowners make up as little as 5 percent of property owners.<sup>2</sup> Lack of land ownership also limits women’s access to credit and membership to rural organizations, essential to access services and market opportunities.
5. Women’s unequal access to services (be it extension services, business development or financial services) is also a consequence of how these are governed and delivered. This also includes the responsiveness (or lack) of the policy and institutional frameworks to gender- and age-based constraints and demands. Due to persisting gender biases, agricultural and rural services are rarely attuned to women’s needs, leading to significant gender gaps in access to information, inputs and technologies. FAO studies show, for example, that the stereotypical association of women with domestic responsibilities precludes them from benefiting from interventions that provide technology and infrastructure for agricultural water management – which instead often falls under their responsibility. These gaps not only undermine women’s resilience to climate change and natural hazards, but also hinder efforts for greening agriculture and reducing environmental degradation by limiting their uptake of climate-resilient practices and technologies.
6. Digitalization holds the potential to facilitate women’s access to services, but only if the gender digital divide is closed. In these unprecedented years of the global COVID-19 pandemic, access to mobile phones and the internet have become more critical than ever, with digital solutions being increasingly applied in the agrifood sector. Despite progress, 23 million women in the NENA region remain unconnected. Women are still 9 percent less likely than men to own a phone and 15 percent less likely to use mobile internet,<sup>3</sup> and the gender gap in relation to internet use also remains significant (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

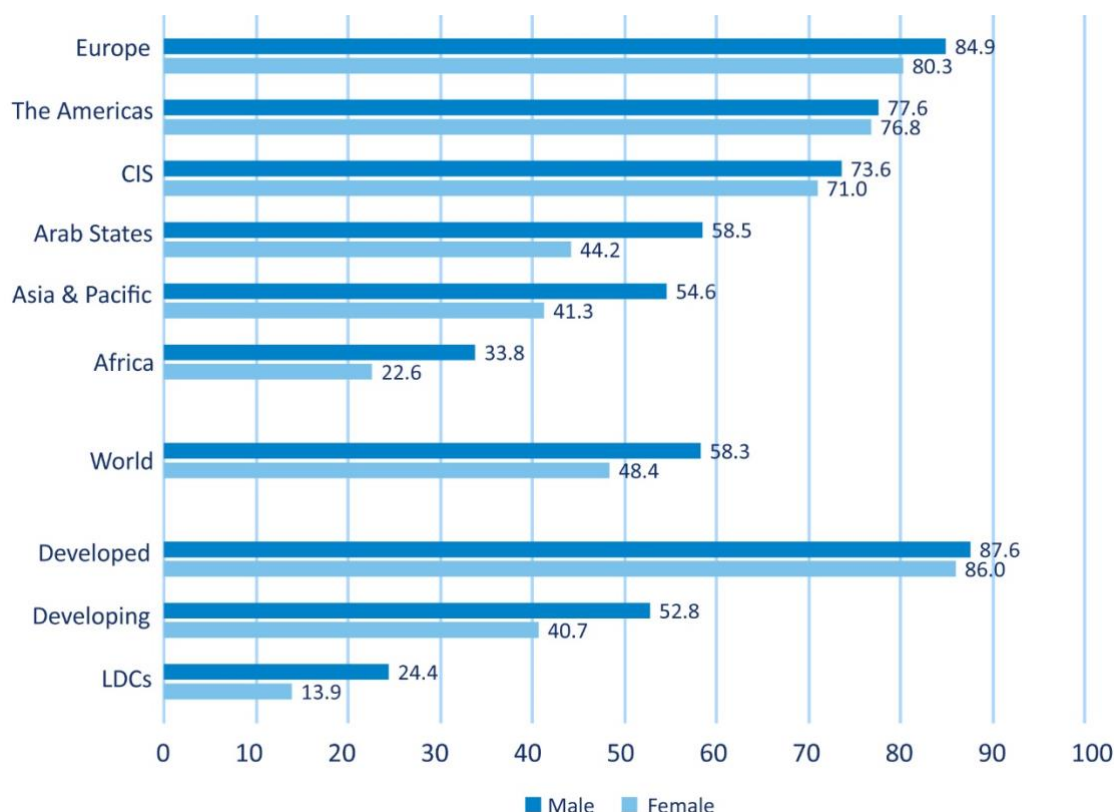
<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum. 2021. *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*. The Report and an interactive data platform are available at <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>

<sup>2</sup> Popal, F. and Langley, B. 2021. *Women’s Leadership and Economic Empowerment. A solution for the Economies of the Middle East and North Africa*. George W. Bush Institution and Centre for International Private Enterprise. Accessed online at: [http://gwbcenter.imgix.net/Publications/Resources/gwbi-2021\\_CIPE\\_paper.pdf](http://gwbcenter.imgix.net/Publications/Resources/gwbi-2021_CIPE_paper.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> GSMA. 2021. *Connected Women. The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021*. Accessed online at: <https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2021.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> International Telecommunication Union (ITU). 2019. *Measuring digital development. Facts and Figures 2019*. Accessed online at: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2020.pdf>

Fig. 1. Internet penetration rate for men and women, 2019\* (Source: ITU, 2019)



7. Labour force participation is just one indicator of women's economic empowerment, but it exemplifies this broader struggle. Despite women exceeding men in higher education enrolments and outcomes, female labour force participation in the NENA region stands at around 20 percent compared with the global average of 47.3 percent.<sup>5</sup> Rural and young women are particularly disadvantaged: unemployment rates for young women peak to above 60 percent in some countries of the region.<sup>6</sup> Multiple factors explain this weak participation in the labour market: from gender-blind employment policies to the excessive burden of unpaid care work and the prevailing social norms that still consider it inappropriate for women to work outside the home.

8. Agriculture remains a critical source of livelihoods and employment: almost a quarter of employed women in the NENA region work in this sector. The share of female employment in agriculture varies significantly across the region, ranging from 39.9 percent in Morocco to less than 1 percent in the Kuwait, Qatar and United Arab Emirates. In all countries for which data is available, fewer women than men are in paid agricultural employment. Only in Tunisia do women represent more than 20 percent of the total paid agricultural employees,<sup>7</sup> reflecting the fact that women mainly work in agriculture as unpaid family workers, as self-employed workers or in the informal sector. Official statistics may also underestimate women's contribution to the sector, as they are typically engaged in occupations difficult to measure in employment surveys (such as agricultural work for household's consumption, home-based work and informal micro-enterprises). Women are often not perceived (and

<sup>5</sup> Source: World Bank, based on modeled ILO estimates retrieved from International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database (29/11/2021):

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?end=2019&locations=ZQ-1W&start=2019&view=bar>

<sup>6</sup> Source: UNSD, SDG Indicator 8.5.2 - Unemployment rate, ages 15-24 (total, female, male) (21/04/2021):

<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/>

<sup>7</sup> Share of female employment in agriculture (% of employment in agriculture)\* FAOSTAT, 20/04/2021, <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/OE>

do not perceive themselves) as farmers and agricultural workers, but rather as “helpers” and “contributing housewives”.

9. Almost 62 percent of working women are informally employed in unregistered jobs, most of which are in the agriculture sector (where most work is by nature daily or seasonal), without legal protection and access to social security (Table 1).<sup>8,9</sup> As a result, women tend to be hit harder by the impacts of shocks and economic downturns, as clearly shown during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Proportion of population with comprehensive legal social protection coverage, by region  
(Source: ILO, 2021)

Region	Total	Male	Female
World	30.6%	34.3%	26.5%
Africa	7.3%	10.8%	3.9%
Americas	42.1%	45.3%	37.7%
Arab States	24.2%	36.1%	8.6%
Asia and the Pacific	29.0%	32.9%	24.7%
Europe and Central Asia	52.7%	55.0%	49.7%

10. FAO recent assessments show that, while women are increasingly active in all agrifood value chains (as wage workers and as entrepreneurs), they remain concentrated in informal, low-skilled, low-paid occupations or micro-enterprises. Their unequal access to capital, assets, services and training often prevents them from developing the technical, business and managerial capacities needed to advance to better employment and entrepreneurial opportunities.

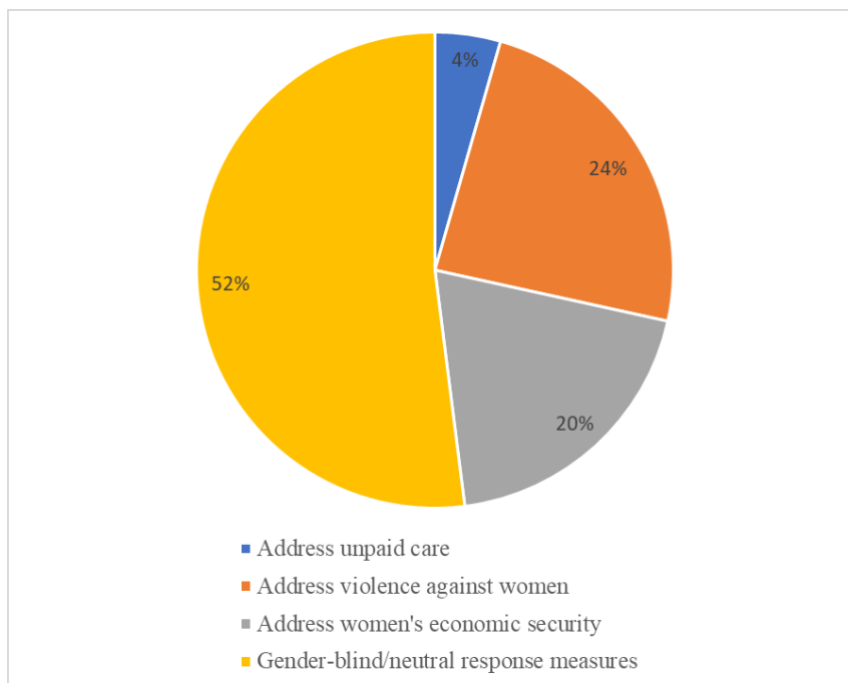
11. Women’s representation in political institutions has continued to rise, but equal participation and leadership are far from being achieved, especially in rural institutions and organizations. Women’s absence from political and decision making processes prevents them from shaping policies, investments and strategies that are more responsive to their needs and interests. The composition of the COVID-19 task forces set up in 2020 is a clear example of this marginalization and contributes to explain why, out of 225 measures adopted in the region in response to the pandemic, less than half

<sup>8</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). 2020. *COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses*. Accessed online: [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134\\_134470-w95kmv8khl&title=COVID-19-crisis-in-the-MENA-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses&\\_ga=2.211158165.1808124451.1637315798-1644641798.1637315797](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134470-w95kmv8khl&title=COVID-19-crisis-in-the-MENA-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses&_ga=2.211158165.1808124451.1637315798-1644641798.1637315797)

<sup>9</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO). 2021. World Social Protection Report 2020-22: Social Protection at the crossroads-in pursuit of a better future. P.56 Accessed online: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_817572.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms_817572.pdf)

(108) can be considered gender-sensitive and only 24 percent of them (54) specifically target women's economic security and burden of unpaid care (Figure 2).<sup>10</sup>

Fig. 2. Proportion of gender-sensitive measures out of total social protection and labour market response (Source: UNDP, 2020)



12. The COVID-19 crisis clearly highlighted communities' reliance on women's unpaid care and domestic work, which has been further exacerbated by the pandemic. In the NENA region, women already spent on average six times more time on unpaid care and domestic work compared to men prior to the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> Women's work burden directly impacts on their ability to engage in paid work, education and public life. Women and girls living in remote rural areas or conflict-affected areas, where services and infrastructure are lacking or disrupted, face a greater risk of 'time poverty' and excessive work burden.

## II. FAO's work on gender equality at regional and country level

13. In 2020, FAO endorsed a new Policy on Gender Equality that set clear gender equality objectives, aligned with the SDGs, and minimum standards for gender mainstreaming to orient the Organization's technical and normative work. The Policy's objectives contribute to the achievement of the four regional priorities and are embedded in FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31, in which gender is addressed both as a cross-cutting theme and a specific Programme Priority Area (PPA).

14. Since the last Regional Conference, FAO has continued to invest in generating data and knowledge about the gender gaps in agriculture and the solutions to overcome them. Between 2020-21, Egypt, Lebanon, Mauritania, Palestine and the Sudan finalized comprehensive Country Gender

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women. 2020. Global Gender response Tracker Fact sheet – Arab States. Accessed online:

[https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/Sustainable\\_development/covid-19-global-gender-response-tracker-.html](https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/Sustainable_development/covid-19-global-gender-response-tracker-.html)

<sup>11</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2020). *COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses*. Accessed online: [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134\\_134470-w95kmv8khl&title=COVID-19-crisis-in-the-MENA-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses&\\_ga=2.211158165.1808124451.1637315798-1644641798.1637315797](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134470-w95kmv8khl&title=COVID-19-crisis-in-the-MENA-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses&_ga=2.211158165.1808124451.1637315798-1644641798.1637315797)

Assessments of the Agriculture and Rural Sector in close collaboration with national counterparts. In 2021, FAO also partnered with the World Food Programme (WFP) and CARE International to assess the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality and food security in Iraq and the Sudan. The study shed light on the needs of different population groups and confirmed the importance of collecting data disaggregated by gender and other relevant social dimensions (such as age, residency status and disability).

15. Efforts have been made to adopt standardised methodologies that can facilitate the consolidation of information at regional level and monitor progress over the years. This is the case of the methodology for gender-responsive water assessments developed in the context of the regional project *Implementing the 2030 Agenda for water efficiency/productivity and water sustainability in the NENA countries*, used for the analyses in Egypt, Palestine and Tunisia. The same methodology used for the COVID-19 impact assessment in Iraq and the Sudan, in collaboration with CARE, has also been applied in Yemen.

16. The availability of gender-relevant information does not automatically translate into gender-responsive policies and programmes. Therefore, FAO has engaged with regional and national institutions working on women's empowerment, such as the Arab Women Organization or the National Council of Women in Egypt, to foster policy dialogue and leverage impact. The workshops held for the validation of the Country Gender Assessments in Egypt and Algeria offered the opportunity to strengthen collaboration with the national gender machinery. At the regional level, the consultation on the new Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment by the Committee of the World Food Security brought together numerous stakeholders, offering a platform to women, as experts and activists, to voice their demands for more gender-responsive food security and nutrition policies.

17. Numerous FAO initiatives at country level contributed specifically to the objectives set by the FAO Policy on Gender Equality, particularly Objective 3 on equal rights, access and control over services, markets and decent work. In Lebanon, Mauritania and Palestine, for example, FAO supported women's participation in agrifood value chains through an integrated package of technical, business and financial support. Based on the awareness that conflicts and crises have gender-differentiated impacts, specific assistance has been provided to support women's economic recovery in particularly fragile situations, through the provision of inputs and resources (such as seeds and small livestock) in Iraq, the Sudan, Syria and Yemen. In these projects, women are targeted not only as direct beneficiaries, but also indirectly in light of their key role in ensuring household and child nutrition.

18. Several interventions were conducted to contribute to Objective 1 on women's participation and leadership in several countries in the region, including Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen. These focused on the establishment or strengthening of women's cooperatives and associations, not only as a means to provide improved access to market and resources, but also to create platforms for women's leadership. Interestingly, FAO in Lebanon introduced the use of "household methodologies", a gender-transformative approach that is specifically used to engage all household members to discuss unequal power relations and gender roles while developing a joint vision for the family business. Through several interventions, FAO Yemen has consolidated its support to women's participation in water users' associations, which are typically male-dominated in the countries, with the specific aim of challenging unequal power relations in relation to water governance and decision making.

19. In response to the unequal access to agricultural support services, several countries consolidated the use of Farmer Field Schools, a modality of peer-to-peer service provision and community engagement which proved successful to meet rural women's specific needs and transform unequal power relations at community level. Farmer Field Schools are very versatile and have been used with different purposes: to provide access to good agricultural practices, skills in water management, and nutrition education. In Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, FAO has also introduced Farm Business Schools and Cooperative Business Schools, which, with a similar approach, aim to support

women farmers to acquire entrepreneurial and managerial skills needed to develop profitable businesses.

### **III. Beyond gender mainstreaming: the need for innovative and transformative actions**

20. Building resilient food systems, able to deliver better livelihoods, decent employment and healthy diets for all while responding to the impacts of crises and climate change will only be possible by eliminating the gender disparities that affect the agriculture and rural sector.

21. To achieve the Regional Priorities and the objectives set by the FAO Policy on Gender Equality, ultimately contributing to the achievement of the SDGs, it is critical to move beyond “business as usual” and shift towards bolder and transformative approaches that explicitly address the unequal social norms and relations underlying agrifood systems in the NENA region. Priority areas of action include:

- a) Generating and disseminating data and statistics disaggregated by gender, age and other relevant social dimensions to quantify the gender gaps in agriculture, at country and regional level, and monitor progress over time.
- b) Accelerating efforts to report SDG indicators and targets relevant to gender and food systems, such as SDG 5 Indicator 5.a.1 and 5.a.2 on women’s ownership of land.
- c) Fostering policy and legal frameworks that ensure women’s equal entitlements, access to and control over assets (land in particular), resources and agricultural and rural services.
- d) Promoting an enabling environment (at the household level, at the workplace and within communities) through dedicated policy-making, legislations, awareness-raising and incentives to enhance women’s, mainly young and rural women’s, decent employment and entrepreneurship in agriculture and rural areas.
- e) Ensuring access to social protection programmes that can increase women’s resilience to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the other crises affecting the region.
- f) Fostering the systematic adoption of gender-transformative approaches, such as household methodologies, Farm Business Schools and Farmer Field Schools, that challenge unequal power relations and promote behavioural change through household and community mobilization.
- g) Advancing policies and capacity development initiatives to bridge the gender digital gap, to minimize the risks of rural women’s exclusion as active stakeholders in the digitalization of agrifood systems.
- h) Enhancing efforts aimed to reduce women’s excessive burden of work by providing gender-sensitive and labour-saving technologies, services and infrastructure, while also promoting an equal redistribution of women’s unpaid care and domestic work at the household level.
- i) Fostering policy coherence and coordination, including exploring partnerships and collaborations across sectors (e.g. agrifood, health, education, employment, research, gender equality), and bringing together stakeholders from different constituencies to leverage gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment both at country and regional levels.