

February 2014

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# FAO Regional Conference for the Near East

## Thirty-second Session

Rome, Italy, 24-28 February 2014

### Addressing Gender Gap in Agriculture and the Rural Sector in the Near East and North Africa

#### Executive Summary

In the Near East and North Africa (NENA), the role of women in agriculture and the rural sector has increased significantly. In many countries of the region, agricultural incomes no longer suffice to sustain the livelihoods of rural men and women. This has resulted, in particular, in massive migration of males from rural areas to cities and neighbouring countries to work as wage labourers, leaving women as main producers of food. However, while various governments in the NENA region have introduced new institutional arrangements and legislative changes in favour of women, there is still room to improve access to productive resources and economic opportunities, adequate rural infrastructure and services.

This document analyzes the main challenges in relating to gender in agriculture and the rural sector. Subsequently, it outlines a set of essential elements for national and regional measures to ensure gender-sensitive agriculture and rural development policies through strengthening rural institutions, developing the human capital of women and youth, and promoting the economic empowerment of vulnerable men and women.

#### Guidance Sought:

The Regional Conference is invited to:

- Note the content of the NERC/14/6 Paper *Addressing Gender Gap in Agriculture and the Rural Sector in the Near East and North Africa* as an input to an open dialogue on the importance of rural women's empowerment;
- Request FAO to pay due attention to the crosscutting gender theme as per the Revised Strategic Framework and the 2014-2015 Programme of Work and Budget in the implementation of its regional programme of work in the Near East and North Africa, and in particular of the Regional Initiatives.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

1. In many countries of the Near East and North Africa region (NENA), agricultural incomes no longer suffice to sustain the livelihoods of rural men and women. This has resulted in large waves of male migration from rural areas to cities and neighbouring countries to work as wage labourers. Within this context, the importance of women's roles as food producers and sole care givers has increased significantly. Women that have stayed behind mainly practise subsistence agriculture, lacking other economic opportunities, in part because of prevailing gender-discrimination in labour markets.
2. Notwithstanding women's predominance in agriculture, their disadvantages as producers have been exacerbated by lack of access to productive resources, economic opportunities, inadequate rural infrastructure and services.
3. This paper provides an overview of the main challenges relating to women in agriculture and the rural sector in the NENA region<sup>1</sup> and proposes recommendations to inform Member States in related efforts and to guide FAO's support to those efforts.

## II CHALLENGES RELATING GENDER IN AGRICULTURE AND THE RURAL SECTOR

4. Gender gap in the NENA region remains a main challenge both in the agricultural sector and beyond, and addressing this gap in NENA could contribute to the economic growth in urban and rural areas.
5. In NENA access to land, economic or other livelihood opportunities is limited by gender, and much of women's work - especially in rural areas - is often invisible in national statistics.
6. Despite the significant gains in the NENA region over the last three decades, education is still less accessible to rural than to urban women. Rural women in the region also have a high illiteracy rate which severely limits their agency and participation in associations and organizations.
7. Despite their important role in agriculture, women in NENA own and hold less land than men. Lack of land ownership has implications for men's and women's adaptive capacity to improve agricultural productivity and to sustain their livelihoods as it limits access to decision-making processes, support systems, new technologies, rural services and training. Women also hold smaller land plots than men. The small parcel size hinders mechanization and the development of infrastructure such as irrigation that could improve yields.
8. Land tenure and property rights are usually required as collaterals for loans. Its absence creates constraints in accessing credit and other financial services needed to build up capital and start an enterprise, and/or to acquire equipment or the skilled labor required in the production process. In addition to this, legal and policy barriers and cultural norms prevent women in some countries in NENA from keeping bank accounts or entering into contracts without the consent of their husbands or male relatives.
9. Many rural women are not aware of the demand in domestic and international markets that could represent good business opportunities due to lack of business literacy and limited knowledge of where and how to get to markets. In some countries, the lack of transport and social restraints to women's physical mobility, make it impossible to reap benefits from these opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> While the high heterogeneity of the region in terms of economic situation is acknowledged, the paper focuses mainly on the rural and agricultural areas most affected by poverty and food insecurity.

10. Women farmers and entrepreneurs face higher entry barriers than men in non-traditional value chains due to limited access to assets, credit, services, markets and information. They most often remain in the lower segments of the agricultural value chains.

11. Rural women are significantly less served than men in knowledge transfer and agricultural extension services in some countries, although agricultural extension for women farmers through NGOs has increased. In Jordan, technology transfer and extension services target primarily male farmers, even in rural communities where women provide the bulk of agricultural activities. In Egypt, 39% of economically active women work formally in agriculture.<sup>2</sup> Poultry subsistence production and rice farming are almost entirely in women's hands. Women play also a significant role in fish and dairy production, and are responsible for post-harvest activities of most agricultural products.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in government programs women are seen as farming assistants and extension messages primarily target male farmers. Even though some countries have taken steps to adopt a gendered approach and hire more female extension agents, qualified female personnel are often lacking.

12. Rural women are less served by research. For example, research in the area of improved seeds and farming technology focuses primarily on irrigated cultures rather than rain-fed plots, where most women work. Farming technology is designed for larger plots of land than those to which women have access. Research focuses on cash crops rather than subsistence food crops that women grow and own.

13. Women are the main care givers in the household. The health of household members affects the amount of time women have available to work in productive activities. This is why the availability of health and care delivery systems, clean water and sanitation are crucial to women's long-term productivity in rural areas. Among the poor, the inability to cover health costs is significant and affects children and pregnant women in particular.<sup>4</sup>

14. Young women have higher probability to be unemployed than young males: in many countries in the region, unemployment rates among young women aged 15–24 approach 50%, compared to 10–20% for males of the same age group.<sup>5</sup> Employment opportunities for women are often highly concentrated in the public sector<sup>6</sup>, but rural women typically cannot take advantage of these as most are in the cities and requiring relatively high educational levels.

15. Even when employment opportunities exist, women are systematically paid less than their male counterparts. Women are also more likely to work in family-related farms or businesses, for free, or in the informal sector. In the NENA region, the distribution of employment among men and women is represented as follows<sup>7</sup>:

	Female	Male
<b>Agriculture</b>	<b>39.6</b>	<b>34.0</b>
Self-employed	38.6	24.6
Wage earner	1.0	9.4
<b>Non-agriculture</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>39.7</b>
Self-employed	2.8	8.8

<sup>2</sup> FAO, IFAD and ILO (2010) Gender dimensions of agriculture and rural employment: Differential pathways out of poverty. Status, trends, gaps.

<sup>3</sup> AARINENA (2012) Women Empowerment for Improved Research in Agricultural Development.

<sup>4</sup> The World Bank (2012)

<sup>5</sup> FAO and IFAD (2007) and The World Bank (2013) Opening Doors. Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa.

<sup>6</sup> The World Bank (2013)

<sup>7</sup> FAO, IFAD and ILO (2010)

Wage earner	3.9	30.9
<b>Non-active or not reported</b>	<b>53.3</b>	<b>26.0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>99.6</b>	<b>99.7</b>
Residual	0.4	0.3

16. Social protection programmes, including social assistance plans and formal social safety net transfers, reach only about 1.6% of the poor in the region due to fragmentation, inadequate coordination with other agencies, and lack of administrative capacity.<sup>8</sup> The dominant elements of social security policies in most NENA countries are social insurance programmes that provide long-term benefits for old age. Such plans cover workers on regular contracts (formal employment) but not other categories of workers such as temporary or casual workers, agricultural workers, and those working in small enterprises.<sup>9</sup> Women, who constitute the majority of these categories, and women with short and interrupted formal employment, are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks as a result of the limited or no social security coverage.<sup>10</sup> In order to target women, cash transfer programs to keep girls in school or ensure regular and timely health care for women have been introduced in a number of NENA countries, but the coverage of these programs are still not comprehensive.<sup>11</sup>

### III ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT IN THE REGION

17. The endorsement by FAO's Governing Bodies of FAO's Policy on Gender Equality<sup>12</sup> in May 2012 has renewed the commitment to the promotion of women's empowerment in the region aimed at increasing food security and rural development. As part of this commitment, the Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa has made advances to foster gender mainstreaming, develop the gender skills and competences of individuals and institutions, and promote more targeted programming, monitoring/impact evaluation and documentation.

18. The FAO's Revised Strategic Framework and the 2014-2015 Programme of Work and Budget, in which gender is a crosscutting theme, will guide FAO's work on gender in the region, providing policy and technical advice for the formulation, implementation and monitoring of socially inclusive and gender-sensitive national and regional food security, agriculture and rural development policies, strategies and programmes, and contribute to the Country Programme Frameworks (CPFs) as requested by Member States.

19. A regional network platform and its related website<sup>13</sup> on Gender Equality and Rural Women's Empowerment has been created by RNE and launched in 2013 and should contribute to gender mainstreaming work and partnership in the region.

20. At country level, many initiatives have been undertaken aimed at increasing gender focus in the agriculture sector. For example, in Tunisia, FAO supported the sustainable livelihoods of over 3,000 women involved in clam harvesting by reducing their dependence on middle-men and increasing their income from artisanal fisheries. In Egypt, an on-going FAO-Government Cooperative Programme has as an objective the creation of a food-secure environment where women and youth have better access, skills, and knowledge to improve their diets with sufficient and diversified food from both animal and vegetable source and to improve their nutritional knowledge. In Oman, a proposal was

<sup>8</sup> UNDP (2011) Arab Development Challenges Report 2011; Towards the Developmental State in the Arab Region.

<sup>9</sup> UNDP (2011)

<sup>10</sup> UNDP (2011), The World Bank (2012)

<sup>11</sup> The World Bank (2013)

<sup>12</sup> FAO (2013) Policy on Gender Equality. Attaining Food Security Goals in Agriculture and Rural Development. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/017/i3205e/i3205e.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <http://neareast.fao.org/Gender.aspx>

formulated to strengthen the Rural Women Department to support the economic empowerment of women producers and entrepreneurs in agriculture, livestock, and fisheries. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, women cooperatives were incorporated into a Junior Farmer Field and Life School (JFFLS) Project that provided training in nutrition, food processing, marketing and other skills from extension workers trained by FAO. In March 2013 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between FAO and the Moroccan Women's National Union, an umbrella organization incorporating 57 women's associations covering the entire country with the aim of enhancing the capacities of rural women and encouraging their integration in professional organizations and their overall economic empowerment.

#### **IV REGIONAL MEASURES TO MAINSTREAM GENDER IN THE REGION**

21. Despite the progress made since the mid-1990s to mainstream gender into policy making, national programs and structures of the Ministries of Agriculture, the actual impact on the livelihood of rural women has been more limited than hoped for. There is a need for a renewed commitment from high level policy and decision-makers in order to ensure that laws and policies ensure equitable opportunities and participation agriculture and rural development.

22. FAO is prepared to support interested Member States in formulating and implementing, with relevant partners in the region, a regional gender approach aimed at increased food security and rural development, including the following elements:

- a. Formulate and implement gender-sensitive food security and rural poverty reduction policies, sustained by adequate budget allocations.
- b. Prioritize inclusive economic growth, founded on a rights- based approach, aimed at reducing rural poverty.
- c. Implement legal and policy reforms to ensure equitable land laws and guarantee women's right to land;
- d. Build legal awareness on land and water rights and provide both statutory and traditional assistance and appeal mechanisms. Provide guidance and support to rural dwellers to acquire personal identification documents legitimizing their rights as full citizens with equal access to productive assets.
- e. Provide advice and support to the design and implementation of approaches to improve the access and rights of rural poor, women, vulnerable and small-scale producers for sustainable management of natural resources.
- f. Leverage FAO's role as knowledge broker, promote South-South cooperation, and enhance the exchange among countries in the region.
- g. Establish cooperation and partnerships with regional bodies, the private sector and civil society organisations with the aim of expanding resource mobilisation efforts leading to sustainable and efficient programming.

23. Strengthening rural institutions: Strong and inclusive rural institutions are essential for poverty reduction, and economic development of small producers.. Efforts are required to ensure that both women and men served by rural institutions such as producers' organizations, labour unions, trade groups and other membership-based organizations. Public and private service providers operating in rural areas, such as extension services, animal health services and micro finance organizations, should consider the specific needs of women to ensure gender-aware interventions.

- a. Provide evidence-based policy and capacity development support to governments in the design and delivery of gender-sensitive approaches to rural services and infrastructure provision that are pro-poor and demand-driven to reach the most vulnerable men and women.
- b. Increase national investment in agricultural extension services, selecting and training female extension agents.

- c. Develop and implement policies and programs to sustain women producers' organizations and enable them to compete in the agricultural sector.
  - d. Improve research in crops, livestock, fisheries and technology to support women's activities.
  - e. Facilitate access to ICTs through targeted programmes for women and youth.
24. Development of human capital of women, boys and girls: Education and transfer of information and practical skills will broaden the range of opportunities for women and youth and contribute more fully within their households and communities.
- Develop and implement new policies and strategies to support women and youth in rural areas in developing skills needed to enhance their employment opportunities.
25. Economic empowerment of women and girls: Increasing the economic opportunities for women requires a complex set of interventions such as creating jobs for women and youth, or improving infrastructure such as child care facilities.
- a. Establish an institutional and policy environment that promotes decent work for rural and migrant women in the formal and informal economy. Eradicate practices that discriminate against women in rural labour markets.
  - b. Take measures to increase the labour productivity and employment opportunities of rural women through training, extension and rural advisory services, social services and labour saving technologies.
  - c. Develop and implement policies to better integrate women in the value chain as workers, producers, entrepreneurs, suppliers and consumers in global, regional and local markets.
  - d. Ensure non-discriminatory business and contractual laws and work with service providers to respond more effectively to the needs of rural women-led enterprises.
  - e. Support mechanisms that build social capital among women entrepreneurs such as cooperatives, self-help groups and rural women's business associations, to access wider markets and increase the value of their products.
  - f. Take measures to ensure social and economic rights for rural women (such as health insurance and pensions, maternity protections, minimum wages and equal pay, collective bargaining power, freedom of association and the right to contribute to social dialogue) with special attention to women workers in the informal economy.
  - g. Create regular channels of market information for women through national communication networks.
26. Social protection programmes: The basic infrastructure to be supported to help rural women includes service roads, small rural clinics and rural water supply networks. Fee waivers for poor women to access basic services can also be a viable policy measure. Some interventions are out of FAO's mandate but are essential for rural areas development. Partnership with civil society organisations and other international development organizations such as ILO, UNFPA, UN WOMEN, WHO, The World Bank and regional development banks, and national development partners will be crucial in realizing these recommendations.
- a. Ensure that national employment guarantee programmes provide a minimal level of income to rural women and men. South-south cooperation can be enhanced to exchange experiences with countries implementing similar successful programmes such as India.
  - b. Include, among the social security benefits, coverage for maternity and unemployment and health-care benefits in order to contribute to the promotion of women's participation in the formal workforce.
  - c. Address the specific needs of rural women, youth, people with disabilities and displaced people facing multiple challenges in the social safety nets.

- d. Design interventions that promote investment in rural women's human capital through conditional cash transfers and workfare programmes, based on best practices around the world.

27. Gender mainstreaming within the Regional Initiatives of FAO's PWB 2014-15 on Water Scarcity and on Food Security and Nutrition will strengthen the capacities for developing gender-sensitive policy frameworks and investment programmes, and encourage an inclusive approach to gender equity with the aim of successful delivery of the Regional Initiative. Similarly, success of the Regional Initiative for Small Scale Agriculture and Inclusive Development will also be supported by the gender mainstreaming element of the Initiative.

#### **V. GUIDANCE SOUGHT:**

28. The Regional Conference is invited to:
- Note the NERC/14/6 Paper Addressing Gender Gap in Agriculture and the Rural Sector in the Near East and North Africa as an input to an open dialogue on the importance of rural women's empowerment;
  - Request FAO to pay due attention to the crosscutting gender theme as per the Revised Strategic Framework and the 2014-2014 Programme of Work and Budget in the implementation of its regional programme of work in the Near East and North Africa, and in particular of the relevant Regional Initiatives.