



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
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NENA Regional Network on Nutrition-sensitive Food System

TECHNICAL BRIEF

Empowering women and ensuring
gender equality in agrifood
systems to achieve better nutrition



Female Retail trader sales grapes at Belbeis street market.
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BACKGROUND

Today, more than one billion women and girls around the world still do not have access to the healthy diets they need to survive and thrive (FAO *et al.*, 2019), and two-thirds of countries report higher rates of food insecurity for women than men (WFP, 2019). At the global level, the prevalence of food insecurity at moderate or severe level, and severe level only, is higher among women than men, magnified in rural areas. The gender gap in accessing food increased from 2018 to 2019, particularly at the moderate or severe level (FAO *et al.*, 2020).

According to the latest FAO Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in the Near East and North Africa (NENA), the Arab Region is not on track to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) target of Zero Hunger (FAO, 2019). **Nearly 55 million people in the Arab States – about 13.2 percent of the total population – are food insecure and the situation is particularly worrying in countries affected by conflicts and protracted crises.** The impact of COVID-19 on the economy of the region will further undermine the goal to achieve the SDG 2.1 target to eliminate hunger by 2030. If recent trends continue, there is a risk that the number of people affected by hunger in the NENA region, could exceed 75 million by 2030 (NENA Food Security and Nutrition Regional Overview, 2020).

The burden of malnutrition in all its forms remains a challenge. According to data analyzed in the 2019 Regional Overview, 22.5 percent of children under the age of five were stunted, 9.2 percent were wasted, and 9.9 percent were overweight. It is important to acknowledge that overweight and obesity rates for adult women are higher in the Arab States than in any other region globally, and there is an estimated rate of 35 percent of anemia in women of reproductive age (15-49), which should be treated as a moderate public health issue in most countries of the region. In addition, no country in the region is on track to meet the World Health Assembly 2025 target for anemia in women of reproductive age (reducing it by half) or for adult obesity (halt its rise).



Female retail trader buys from Belbeis wholesale market.
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Similarly, very few countries in the NENA region are on track to reach the childhood nutrition targets by 2025 and 2030 (seven countries for wasting and only three for stunting or childhood overweight). Gender inequalities in agrifood systems contribute significantly to food insecurity and malnutrition, while there is a large body of evidence demonstrating that promoting women's empowerment and gender-transformative approaches is critical to achieve healthy diets and food security (CARE Scoping review, 2020).

In line with the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, there is growing emphasis on agrifood systems transformation for improving nutritional outcomes and reducing poverty and food insecurity. It is key, however, that this transformation is inclusive and that gender equality dimensions are systematically considered when investing in nutrition-sensitive agrifood system development, to strengthen women's roles and capacities across all functions - from production to consumption - and overcome the constraints that undermine their full potential.

Nutrition-sensitive agrifood systems from production, processing, marketing and consumption have various pathways that can

support improvements in nutrition. These include crop choices that can influence the consumption decisions of producer households, and production outcomes that can influence food prices, income and expenditures and dietary choices. In all these different pathways between agriculture and nutrition it is important to ensure attention to gender equality and women's empowerment dimensions. To be inclusive and sustainable, agrifood system interventions need to promote equal access to information, productive resources and services; disseminate adequate agricultural technologies and practices, including women-friendly time - and labor - saving technologies; facilitate equal access to safe water and energy; and ensure equal participation in training and vocational training programmes, including on nutrition education. Nutrition-sensitive agrifood system interventions that are also gender-transformative are critical for making concrete, cost-effective, and long-lasting improvements on the socio-economic and nutritional status not only of women and girls, but also of their households and communities. A combination of improved knowledge, evidence-informed policies, gender-sensitive regulations and legislations, including adequate finance and investment across the agrifood system is needed to deliver sustainable results and improve nutritional outcomes.



Members of a women's cooperative preparing and canning olives.
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ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Women play key roles in maintaining all four pillars of food security: as food producers and agricultural entrepreneurs; as decision-makers for the food and nutritional security of their households and communities and as “managers” of the stability of food supplies in times of economic hardship. And yet, women’s contributions often remain invisible and undervalued, inadequately reflected in policy, legal and institutional frameworks, neglected by service providers and other actors operating across agrifood systems, thereby preventing them from reaching their full potential.

Gender inequalities in agriculture remain widespread in the Arab region. Rural women and girls continue to face severe discriminations in access to, and ownership of assets, resources and agricultural support services, included those related to community nutrition services. Compared to men, women tend to own lower value assets and have less access to capital, labour, agriculture inputs and tools. In addition, most women’s work in farms in the region is unpaid, rendering it essentially invisible. Women also tend to have less entitlements and access to natural resources, such as land and water. For example, despite the significant role they play in managing it, women frequently face obstacles in accessing irrigation water for the cultivation of crops and for raising livestock. This is mainly due to insecurity of land tenure and to their marginal involvement in water governance institutions and user associations, where they are often under-represented and excluded from decision-making processes. Women also have less access to finance due to absence of collaterals for loans. Moreover, in many instances, women do not control the farm, livestock income due to cultural and or lack of access to banking services.

The same applies to other rural organizations and institutions within the rural and agricultural sectors, and this under-representation largely explains why women’s interests are often overlooked and agricultural support services rarely attuned to respond to their needs.



Workers spreading sliced tomatoes for sun drying prior to marketing.
©FAO/Heba Khamis

This, in turn explains, why women tend to have less access to information, technology and trainings, and a lower uptake of nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices.

Female participation in the labour market in the Arab region is only 21 percent compared with 70 percent for men, which leaves women with less economic power and opportunities. It is estimated that more women than men will fall into poverty and food insecurity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is likely to hit the female-headed households in the region even harder.

Prevailing discriminatory gender norms are both causes and consequences of poverty, food and nutrition insecurity, and higher levels of gender inequality are associated with greater levels of undernutrition, both acute and chronic undernutrition (CARE 2020, HLPE, 2017). Thus, gender norms impact women and girls' direct access to food within the household. In many societies, men and boys are given priority when meals are served, and food taboos, specifically for pregnant and lactating women, may predispose women to poor nutritional outcomes.

Gender inequalities and social norms also govern the division of labor within and outside the household,

assigning women a heavy burden of care and domestic responsibilities, such as caring for the children, the elderly, as well as for sick and disabled family members. This does not only impact women's possibilities to engage in remunerated activities, it also affects their access to education, leisure, or to engage in political and decision-making processes. Recognizing, redistributing and reducing women's work burden is therefore essential to improve food security and nutritional outcomes, not only for women, but also for the entire community.

However, increasing women's productivity and reducing women's work burden is not sufficient to improve food security and nutrition. Additional actions are required to ensure that women have decision-making power and ownership over productive assets and the use of income from agriculture and off-farm employment. Promoting women's participation in decision-making processes at all levels is therefore a particularly important aspect of empowerment as it leads to wider social and economic changes. In order to do so and to achieve sustainable and transformative changes, it is essential to address the prevailing and discriminatory gender norms that are hindering women and girls to reach their full potential, and thus impacting food security and nutritional outcomes for women, girls, boys and men.



Facilitators/Engineers train women in planting and preparing protected farms at Farmer Field Schools.
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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Gender equality and nutrition are interlinked and mutually reinforcing objectives, thus it is important to ensure that these are addressed in agrifood system related programmes and projects in a synergic way, from the identification to the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) phase. Programmes should be able to trace impact pathways through different programming inputs, activities and outputs to improve nutrition, reduce gender inequalities and ultimately ensure healthy diets for all. Selecting and incorporating appropriate indicators related to gender and nutrition in the M&E of projects and programmes will help to assess the effectiveness of agrifood system interventions and ensure that investments achieve tangible results both on nutrition and women's empowerment.
- It is also essential that agrifood system interventions target women and girls explicitly and aim to address discriminatory gender norms. Taking into consideration women's needs in nutrition-sensitive agrifood system interventions can positively result in gender equality, women's empowerment and improved nutritional status for the entire community.
- Nutrition-sensitive agrifood system interventions need to support the nutritional well-being of the entire population, and thus include targeted measures for the most nutritionally vulnerable groups, which typically include adolescent girls, women of reproductive age, pregnant and lactating women, children (between 6 and 23 months, of preschool age and school age children), disabled people and the elderly.
- There is need to have sex-disaggregated data and information in agrifood system and to link them with food security and nutrition information systems to better respond to the underlying and basic determinants of malnutrition and gender inequalities. This could be done by incorporating a gender analysis as part of the regular nutrition and food security situation analysis for assessing the issues, challenges, and identifying the needs, priorities and roles of women, men, girls and boys along agrifood systems.
- To improve nutrition outcomes for women, there is need to scale up proven nutrition-sensitive agrifood-system interventions. Various nutrition-sensitive agrifood system interventions such as promotion of innovative technologies to reduce women's time constraints; initiatives that enhance women's access to, and control over, incomes and other resources; activities that improve women understanding of good nutrition; and increase women involvement in decisions making at all levels; can positively impact on nutrition and empower women.
- A harmonized and integrated approach is essential to effectively reduce gender inequalities, empower women and improve the nutritional status for rural and urban communities. There is need to ensure that other sectoral programmes, such as health, education, environment, water and sanitation, climate change and social protection programmes, take gender and nutrition into account.
- Enabling political, legislative and policy support with adequate participation of women in agrifood system related decision-makings would be crucial for reducing gender inequalities and eliminating all forms of malnutrition. Multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration and coordination will be paramount for achieving desired results.

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Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations



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