

Women as pillars of family farming in North Africa

In North Africa, women play a major role in family farming (BOX 1) and contribute significantly to food security and the economy of rural areas.

They represent between 25% and 40% of the workforce on family farms and carry out a variety of activities, including agricultural production, herd care, processing and promotion of local products¹, and gathering activities. Their contribution tends to increase, with men increasingly turning to non-agricultural income-generating activities, in the city and even abroad (Marzin et al., 2017).

In addition, as bearers of in-depth knowledge of the agrosystems in which they operate, women are central to the management of natural resources, the preservation of biodiversity and the conservation of local seeds. They also play an essential role in the transmission, particularly intergenerational, of knowledge and practices (Jacquemot, 2019; MEDAE, 2025).

BOX 1 / Family farming in North Africa

Family farming is an ancestral model of land reclamation in North Africa and is still a **key pillar of food security** today with strong economic, social, cultural and environmental importance.

In this model, agricultural production is managed and operated by a family and relies heavily on **family labour**. The family and the farm are linked, evolve together and perform economic, environmental, reproductive, social and cultural functions (FAO, 2014).

Family farming contributes significantly (80%) to agricultural production in the Near East and North Africa region (Marzin et al., 2017) and supports rural areas through job creation, both within farms and in the entire sector, upstream (supply of agricultural equipment and inputs) and downstream (collection, storage, processing, transport or sale) of production.

However, despite their major contribution to agricultural and food activities, rural women's work and knowledge are often invisible and undervalued, and women face strong social and economic inequalities (BOX 2 and FOCUS 1).

¹ Such as the argan tree and the prickly pear in the south of Morocco, or dates and pomegranates in the south of Tunisia. Some oasis women, for example, transform unsold dates or pomegranates into jams, syrups, date pastes or other by-products, limiting waste, valuing local resources and providing additional income.

Rural women face exacerbated constraints

Women's agricultural activities are mostly non-income-generating, mainly oriented towards the home and the family's food security, while men are more oriented towards cash crops and extra-agricultural activities, which are more valued (Jacquemot, 2019).

In addition, women have lower rights than men and face many constraints to the development of their agricultural activities, whether in terms of access to land, infrastructure, inputs and equipment, financing, as well as education, agricultural training and advisory services. They have less decision-making power within the household but also within the communities; social norms limiting their mobility, their presence in public spaces, and their ability to participate in village or professional assemblies (Inter-Réseaux, 2021; Oxfam, 2024; FAR Network, 2024).

Women also spend a lot of time on domestic tasks and childcare, hindering their availability for agricultural entrepreneurship or training (Inter-Réseaux, 2021).

These inequalities and constraints, induced by patriarchal socio-cultural values and norms, are still poorly considered in agricultural and rural policies as well as in agricultural development projects. Women's work, the constraints they face (in particular the articulation of productive and reproductive tasks) and their know-how are invisible, and therefore little considered in development policies (Blot, 2023; FAIR Sahel 2024; Inter-Réseaux, 2021).

FOCUS 1 / In Skoura M'Daz (Morocco): women's work is often invisible

In surveys (carried out as part of the NATAE Agroecological Transition in North Africa) research project in Skoura M'Daz, in the Moroccan mountains, work in the fields is often presented as an exclusively male activity by the men interviewed, in the same way as herding herds or marketing products on the market. However, women are particularly involved in the care of animals in the domestic space and take care of weeding, sowing, etc. They also participate in the collection of agricultural products, their trellises, their storage or packaging, but in the context of unpaid and invisible family work (MEDAE, 2025)

BOX 2 / Rural women in North Africa: roles and challenges

ROLES

- Pillars of family farming and major contribution to food security
- Crucial role in the preservation of ecosystems, natural resources and local seeds
- Essential role in the transmission of traditional knowledge and agroecological innovations

CHALLENGES

- Significant time spent on unpaid domestic work
- Reduced rights for access to land, finance and agricultural equipment
- Low rate of access to agricultural extension and support services
- Low decision-making power within households and communities

Encouraging progress

For several years, however, there has been a growing involvement of rural North African women in agricultural entrepreneurship and innovation.

In a context of changes in the rural world, with an increase in women's schooling, and a growing lack of interest among men and young people in agricultural activities, women are increasingly benefiting from the support of development actors and agricultural public policies.

Thus, in recent years, there has been an increase in programs and initiatives aimed at combating gender inequalities, promoting the empowerment of rural women and strengthening their capacities and participation in decision-making: training (particularly for the development of income-generating agricultural activities); integration of women into professional agricultural organizations (e.g. in rural women's units² in Algeria); support for women's cooperatives and groups (for the development of the argan and aromatic and medicinal plants sectors for example); improving women's access to finance and markets...

In Tunisia, for example, the Rural Women's Support Office, in conjunction with the Regional Agricultural Development Commissions (CRDA), has been implementing local development plans since 2012 aimed at improving the socio-economic and cultural context of rural women; promote an equitable presence of women in decision-making positions; facilitate rural women's access to resources, services and factors of production; and adopt a gender approach in the projects implemented (CIHEAM and Union for the Mediterranean, 2018).

Despite encouraging progress, and an institutional and social environment that offers more opportunities, the situation of rural women in North Africa remains marked by gender inequalities, with limited access to productive resources and economic opportunities. Women are also strongly affected by climate change, threatening the development and sustainability of their still fragile activities (FOCUS 2)

FOCUS 2 / In Guelmim-Oued Noun (Morocco): women's activities threatened by climate change

In the Guelmim-Oued Noun region of Morocco, several women's argan oil cooperatives have been forced to halt their activities due to major environmental challenges. Indeed, persistent water stress, seriously affecting argan cultivation, has considerably reduced the yield of argan oil. Similarly, the spread of mealybug has severely compromised the production of prickly pear, an essential resource for many rural women. These combined phenomena lead to a significant drop in productivity and weaken the economic and social sustainability of these still young cooperatives.

In this context, agroecology can constitute an agricultural model that is more resilient to climate change and promotes the emancipation of rural women.

² Rural women's units are management mechanisms, made up of professionals from the agricultural world (agricultural engineers, veterinarians, agricultural technicians, etc.), aimed at providing technical support to rural women, helping them make decisions, and meeting their training needs.

Agroecology, a sustainable agricultural model promoting the emancipation of rural women

Agroecology, as a project and a social movement, represents an important lever for deconstructing gender inequalities, valuing women's knowledge, and promoting the social and economic emancipation of North African women (FAIR Sahel, 2024; Illes de Paix, 2021; MEDAE, 2025).

In parallel, the strengthening of women's agroecological practices and traditional ecological knowledge held by women (selection of local seeds, water management, cultural associations, artisanal processing, etc.) contribute greatly to the preservation of ecosystems and natural resources and to climate resilience (BOX 3 and FOCUS 3).

BOX 3 / Agroecology, a more sustainable and equitable agricultural model



FAO's 10 Principles of Agroecology (2018)

Through a number of principles, agroecology promotes sustainable agricultural practices as well as the "better life" of farmers. At the same time a scientific discipline, agricultural practices and a social and political movement, agroecology aims to transform the food system as a whole. Agroecology is about "taking care" of the environment and people: preserving ecosystems, and strengthening the rights and quality of life of rural populations. The fight against gender inequalities and other social inequalities is therefore an integral part of agroecology (Illes de Paix, 2021; Oxfam, 2024).

The principles of agroecology are a lever for:

- To promote and strengthen the knowledge held by women, through workshops to share experiences and knowledge
- Increase women's economic autonomy through the diversification of production, processing and marketing of local products (e.g. aromatic and medicinal plants or argan oil)
- Promote the social emancipation of women through active participation in community decisions or within cooperatives and associations
- Fostering solidarity networks: developing cooperatives that strengthen social cohesion and collective resilience
- Conserving natural resources, preserving local seeds, respecting ecosystems

FOCUS 3 / Journeys of inspiring women who, despite social, economic and land challenges, have developed agroecological practices, promoting their emancipation as well as the preservation of ecosystems

In Zarzis (Tunisia): A model farm in agroecology

In Zarzis, Imène Chelbi has transformed an intimate wound into a model farm in agroecology. Graduated and city dweller, she left a stable job to follow her dream of sustainable agriculture, despite family opposition and lack of means. She obtained land from the state, sold her car to finance a well, and trained through practice and self-learning. Inspired by her grandmother, a holder of ancestral knowledge, she has made her farm a "window" open to another agricultural model, based on biodiversity, Aloe Vera, permaculture and transmission. Today, *El Rochen* is a place of production, learning and awareness, where children, women and visitors reconnect with the land. Her journey illustrates the resilience of rural women, who are able to challenge patriarchal norms and carry hope for an inclusive and sustainable agroecological transition.

To listen to the full testimony



In Gabès (Tunisia): An oasis beekeeper

Hanen Hadj Amor, an oasis woman from Gabès, overcame a long period of depression to start beekeeping. Starting from a wild hive collected in the wild, she began by observing and learning the behavior of bees before producing her first honey. Little by little, she spread out and increased the number of her hives, producing small quantities of honey, which was first sold to her relatives. With the support of a financial backer, she gradually developed her project: production of honey specific to each season and derivatives such as propolis, pollen, royal jelly and wax, accompanied by transhumance to follow the beekeeping routes. Today, she runs a formal business, employs 2-4 women, attends local and national fairs, and sells online. This story illustrates the resilience, innovation, and empowerment of oasis women.

In Skoura M'Daz (Morocco): A women's agricultural cooperative of aromatic and medicinal plants

In Skoura M'daz, in the Moroccan Atlas, the *Safirat Alaachab* cooperative brings together several producers who grow and process local aromatic and medicinal plants such as saffron, thyme, rosemary, lavender and sage into essential oils, herbal teas and extracts. The women use their ancestral knowledge of picking, drying and distilling to preserve biodiversity while improving the quality and added value of the products. This collective organization allows them to access income, strengthen their autonomy and actively participate in community cohesion. Despite strong constraints (limited access to land, credit, infrastructure, lack of institutional recognition), they show a predisposition to agroecology, demonstrating that women's cooperatives are a lever for socio-economic emancipation and sustainable territorial resilience.

Through their important role in family farming, their agricultural knowledge and their role in the transmission of knowledge, women are major levers for the agroecological transition. Ensuring the active participation of rural women and strengthening their capacities is an essential condition for building a sustainable and equitable agricultural development model.

To do this, it is essential **to remove the barriers that women still face through the implementation of targeted public policies and programs, and to reduce gender inequalities by questioning their sources.**

Institutional and organizational models that produce and reproduce gender inequalities must be questioned for a fair and sustainable agroecological transition. Indeed, the risk of an agroecological transition that does not consider the gender dimension

is that the surplus work that may result from the adoption of agroecological practices³ is delegated to women, by being unpaid and invisible. The agroecological transition, instead of reducing gender inequalities, could then accentuate them (Iles de Paix, 2021; Oxfam, 2024).

The adoption of a gender approach in agroecological development projects and in public policies is therefore fundamental to prevent the situation of women from deteriorating.

Elements of recommendations for an accelerated and fair agroecological transition

We recommend three main pillars of action for an accelerated and equitable agroecological transition:

Pillar 1: Recognize and value the role of women, fight against the discrimination and constraints they face and increase their leadership

Pillar 2: Facilitate the installation of women in agroecology through access to land, resources and markets

Pillar 3: Increase women's access to knowledge through training and networks.

³ Agricultural techniques following the principles of agroecology may require a greater investment in labour than techniques using phytosanitary products and chemical inputs (e.g. hand weeding, compost production, etc.). (Bainville et al., 2025).

Constraints 	Recommendations 
Pillar 1: Recognize and value the role of women, fight against the discrimination and constraints they face and increase their leadership	
Women's work and knowledge in agriculture are undervalued and under-recognized	Recognize, enhance the role of women in agriculture, and institutionalize the gender approach • Carry out more scientific studies on women's agricultural knowledge and practices, which constitute a valuable intangible heritage for agroecology • Disaggregating agricultural work statistics by gender to make visible and enhance the role of women in agriculture • Systematically integrate the gender dimension into action research projects and development programs and generate indicators to promote and monitor the inclusion and involvement of women in the agroecological transition (see for example Buchy, 2016)
Women face gender-based cultural discrimination	Raising awareness of gender inequalities • Raise awareness of gender-based discrimination in society (from school, and through social networks, media, etc.) • Promote and convey women's entrepreneurial initiatives and activities in order to inspire women more broadly, through social networks, schools, media and radio • Promoting women's mobilizations in defense of the rights of rural women workers
Women have less decision-making power in households and communities than men and are less represented in governance systems and decision-making bodies	Increasing female leadership • Support collaborative household decision-making on agricultural work to reduce disparities in access to and use of resources • Encourage women's participation in strategic decision-making bodies and in professional agricultural organizations (local, national)
Women's agricultural activities are often forgotten in agricultural and rural public policies and there is a lack of overall support from state services	Increasing institutional support • Increase programs to support rural women's initiatives • Setting up decision-making, development and support bodies dedicated to rural women (e.g. Rural Women's Support Office in Tunisia, rural women's units in Algeria)
Women have a high domestic workload. They then have less time and opportunities for agricultural initiatives, to follow training, to market their products...	Recognize and reduce women's reproductive workload and specific constraints • Increase the representation of women in decision-making and management bodies to better understand and adapt to the specific constraints of women. Establish systems to free women from certain constraints: childcare systems, etc.

Pillar 2: Facilitate the installation of women in agroecology through access to land, resources and markets	
Women have difficulties in accessing land ownership	Facilitating access to land and the installation of women in agroecology • Putting in place public policies and regulatory frameworks allowing women to access land ownership, or circumventing legal barriers through the allocation of state land (see Imène Chelbi's testimony, Focus 3) • Facilitate access to forest land use rights (e.g. for the cultivation of MAP in Algeria).
Women have limited access to finance, credit, and infrastructure	Facilitating women's access to finance • Improve women's access to subsidies, particularly public aid, through the recognition of the status of farmer and the development of inclusion and support programs for women farmers • Facilitate women's access to finance, including micro-credit, to develop their agricultural activities • Educate rural women about existing support and financing mechanisms

	Extend the duration of support for aid for the development of agricultural activities in order to optimize the sustainability of the activities developed, particularly when they are part of sectors coveted by large companies (example of the argan sector)
Women's agricultural activities are often unpaid; and women face difficulties in accessing markets and marketing channels	Facilitate the creation of income-generating activities and the marketing of products - Supporting women and women's groups in the development of agricultural activities, particularly income-generating activities (processing, cash production) - Encourage the structuring of women into cooperatives, groups or agricultural associations that promote the sharing of food production or processing equipment, and access to the market. - Shortening value chains and promoting short circuits - Support the diversification of income sources through off-farm activities to improve and secure women's living standards, increase women's empowerment and foster the development of agricultural initiatives – where income is invested in agriculture

Pillar 3: Increase women's access to knowledge through training and networks

Women have less access to education, training and knowledge	Encouraging women's access to training to promote their professionalization - Increase women's access to vocational training and the strengthening of agricultural skills: agricultural techniques, agroecological practices, processing, etc. - Encourage NGOs and private training organizations to better include women in the training provided (participants but also speakers) by subsidizing structures that promote gender diversity as a priority - Promote female entrepreneurship, in particular through training to strengthen leadership, business management, marketing skills, etc. - Increase technical advice and support for the development of individual or collective women's entrepreneurial initiatives Promoting knowledge sharing among women farmers - Set up associations or "witness" women farmers who can support women in the development of their activities - Encourage the collective structuring of women into cooperatives, agricultural groups or associations that promote knowledge transfer and innovation - Encourage inter-regional women's meetings to exchange practices and inspiring journeys, and build common advocacy.
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Conclusion

Faced with the environmental, social, economic and food challenges that agriculture in North Africa faces and the limits of conventional agriculture, agroecology offers a more sustainable and resilient model of agriculture.

Agroecology represents a lever to strengthen the empowerment of women as producers, processors and entrepreneurs and to promote their socio-economic emancipation.

By recognising the vital role of North African women in family farming, by removing the barriers they face due to mentalities or family and social structures and by offering them effective support, the agroecological transition could build on the strengths of these women. The development of more sustainable agriculture and food systems could thus accelerate while reducing gender inequalities and revitalizing North Africa's rural territories.



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MEDAE is a multi-stakeholder network to promote agroecology in the Mediterranean.

It aims to facilitate exchanges and collaborations between actors and to advocate for the agroecological transition in the Mediterranean.

To find out more and join the network: <https://www.medae-agroecology.eu/>



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