

Her land. Her rights.

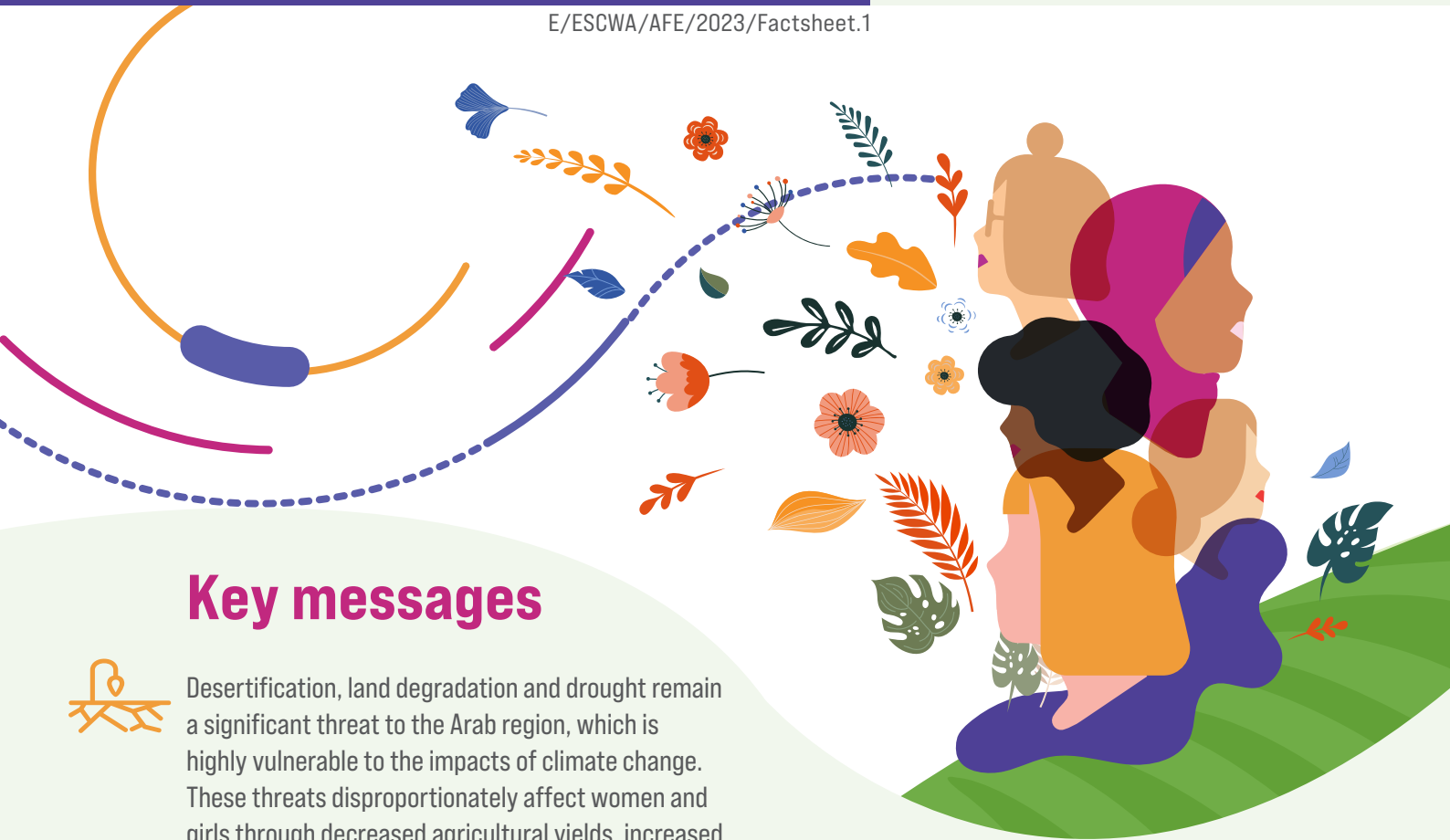
Equal land rights: a pathway to combating desertification in the Arab region



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



E/ESCWA/AFE/2023/Factsheet.1



Key messages



Desertification, land degradation and drought remain a significant threat to the Arab region, which is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. These threats disproportionately affect women and girls through decreased agricultural yields, increased water scarcity, health issues, and biodiversity loss.



In the Arab region, anthropogenic causes of desertification are relatively faster yet less consequential than natural factors.



Illicit practices exacerbated by armed conflict lead to more deforestation, overgrazing, and drying marshlands and wetlands, thus impacting women's well-being in the Arab region.



In most Arab countries, women have unequal and limited access to and control over land resources. They face discriminatory laws and practices, including biased inheritance rights, which hinder their access to services and resources.



Empowering women benefits families and communities. Since women are disproportionately affected by land degradation and climate change, they should be at the forefront of global efforts to restore land and boost drought resilience. Gender-responsive land restoration is a pathway for economic empowerment, environmental sustainability, social cohesion, and gender equality.

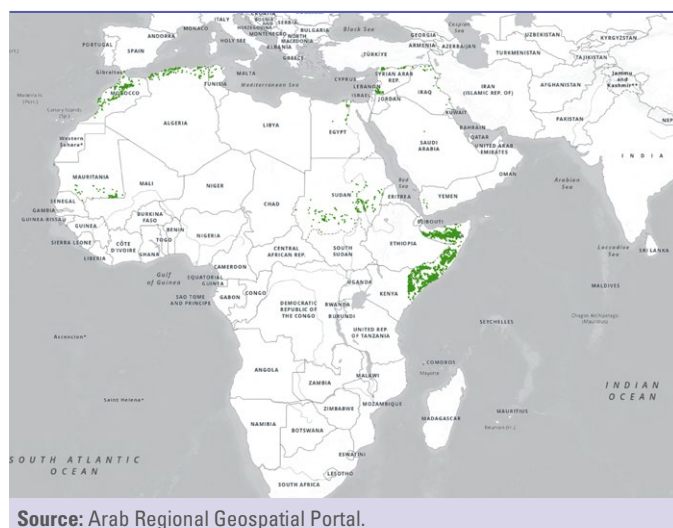


Investing in women's equal access to land and associated assets is a direct investment in their future and the future of humanity. Securing women's land rights helps advance global gender equality and land restoration goals, and contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

1. Regional desertification and drought status

Around 90 per cent of the Arab region is covered by arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas, which are characterized by limited natural resources, including water and arable land, harsh environments and fragile ecosystems. A rapid increase in population, considered among the highest worldwide, is putting pressure on limited land and water resources. Moreover, changing lifestyles, leading to greater consumption and food demand, have accelerated land degradation and reduced land productivity. Land degradation, which is synonymous to desertification in the Arab region, has worsened as a result of human activities, deforestation, overgrazing and other unsustainable agricultural practices, and the growing impact of climate change. Despite regional and national efforts to combat land degradation and desertification, significant difficulties remain in tackling these challenges.

Figure 1. Crop area affected by drought in the Arab region



Source: Arab Regional Geospatial Portal.

The economic cost of land degradation in the region is estimated at \$9 billion per year (between 2 and 7 per cent of the GDP of individual Arab countries). Salinity in the soil reduces productivity and crop yields, causing economic losses estimated at \$1 billion annually across the region.¹

Estimates indicate the following:

90%

of the Arab region consists of dryland and is threatened by degradation and desertification.

1.6%

annual population increase was reported in 2021 compared with the world's average of 0.9%.

Over **1,000**

species are threatened by extinction

25%

decline in forest area as a proportion of total land area has occurred in the region since 1990, primarily owing to large reductions in several Arab least developed countries (LDCs), namely the Comoros, Somalia and the Sudan.

73%

of the already limited arable land in the Arab region is affected by land degradation.

Acknowledgements

The present document was prepared by Lina Fleifel, Research Assistant in the ESCWA Climate Change and Natural Resources Sustainability Cluster, under the supervision of Reem Nejdawi, Chief of the ESCWA Food and Environment Policies Section; and of Hammou Laamrani, Economic Affairs Officer at ESCWA. Contributions, comments and reviews were provided by Fidele Byiringiro, Sarah Daniel, Maria Pilar Ouro Paz and Raffaele Bertini from ESCWA.

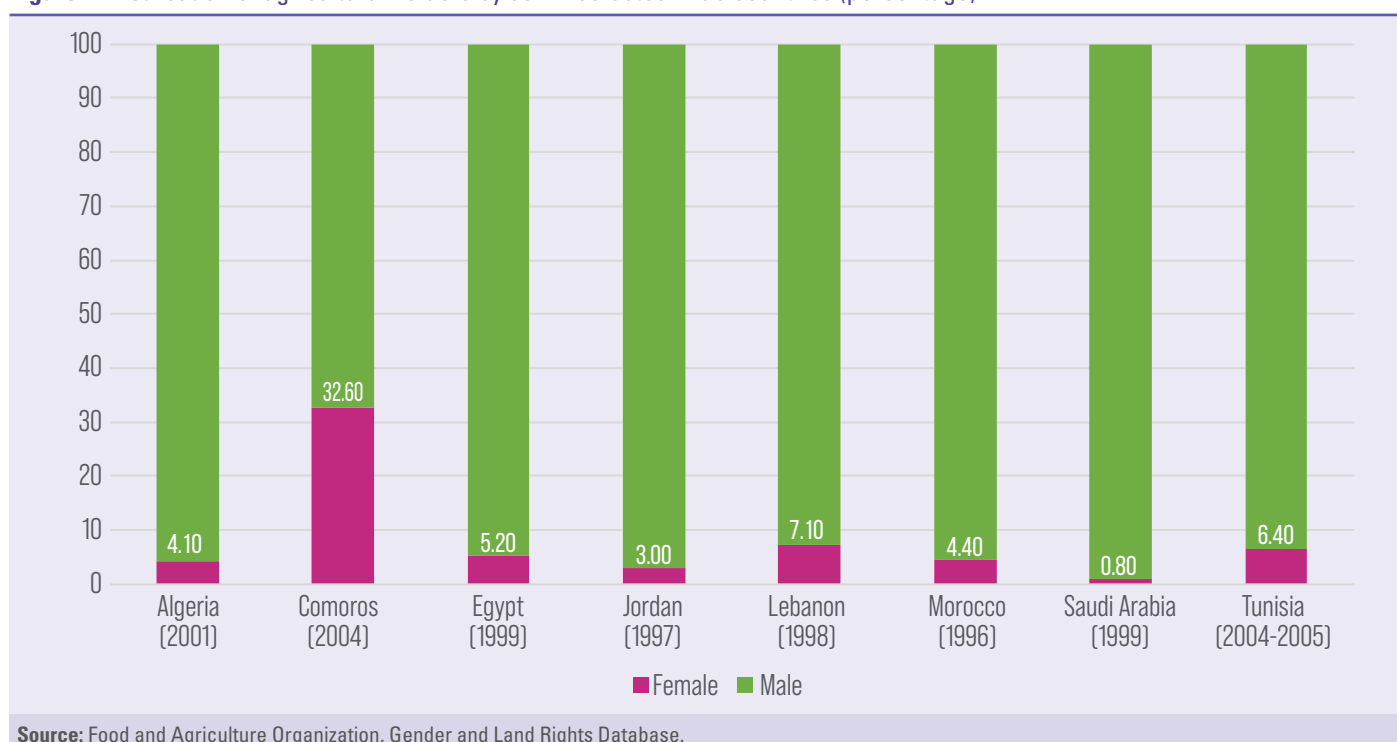


Land degradation, deterioration of ecosystems and biodiversity loss have increasingly harmful effects on human health and well-being, poverty reduction and the environment. Women are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of such deteriorations as they are often responsible for household water and food security, both of which are threatened by desertification. Women involved in crop harvesting are also affected by land degradation and will see their crop yields decrease over time, resulting in lower income and fewer job opportunities, thus forcing them to find alternative income sources. Furthermore, deforestation, overgrazing, and drying marshlands and wetlands tend to increase in conflict contexts, which weaken State capacity to preserve resources. Illicit practices exacerbated by armed conflict lead to more

desertification and land degradation, further impacting women's well-being in the Arab region. Consequently, studying the impact of desertification on women in the region is important, because they devote most of their time and effort to the land, and are disproportionately affected by the adverse impacts of desertification, so understanding their experiences is critical to effectively tackling the issue.

Globally, female employment in low-income and lower-middle-income countries is mostly in the agriculture sector. While 23 per cent of total female employment in the Arab region is in the agriculture sector, millions of women are denied the right to own the land on which they live, work and care for their families.

Figure 2. Distribution of agricultural holders by sex in selected Arab countries (percentage)



The proportion of female landholders is under 10 per cent in most Arab countries where data are available, including Saudi Arabia at 0.8 per cent, Jordan at 3 per cent, Algeria at 4.1 per cent, Morocco at 4.4 per cent, and Egypt at 5.2 per cent, with the notable exception of the Comoros at 32.6 per cent.²

Evidence shows that women are significantly disadvantaged relative to men with regard to land rights. Given this discrepancy in land ownership and gender equality, the 2023 World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought is emphasizing women's land rights as crucial to achieving global objectives related to gender equality, and to halting land degradation by 2030. Addressing women's land rights will also contribute to progress on various other SDGs.

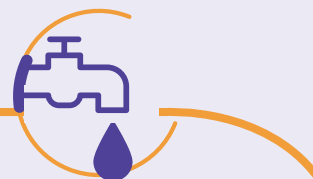


“Women are major actors in the global efforts to reduce and reverse land degradation. However, in the vast majority of countries, women have unequal and limited access to and control over land. We cannot achieve land degradation neutrality without gender equality, and we cannot exclude half the population from land management decisions because of their gender.”- Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

2. Land degradation affects women differently than men

Land degradation affects women differently than men in the Arab region owing to women's unequal access to resources, their roles in society, and social and cultural norms. Women have limited access to land, water and other natural resources owing to discriminatory custodian laws and practices. Degradation exacerbates existing gender inequalities by reducing the availability and quality of these resources, thus limiting women's ability to sustain their livelihoods and provide for their families. Women are also excluded from decision-making processes related to land use and natural resource management, leading to weak access to information, to resources including credit, and to basic services, thus further limiting their ability to cope with the impacts of desertification. Desertification impacts women through water scarcity, health issues, food insecurity, migration, and biodiversity loss.

Water scarcity



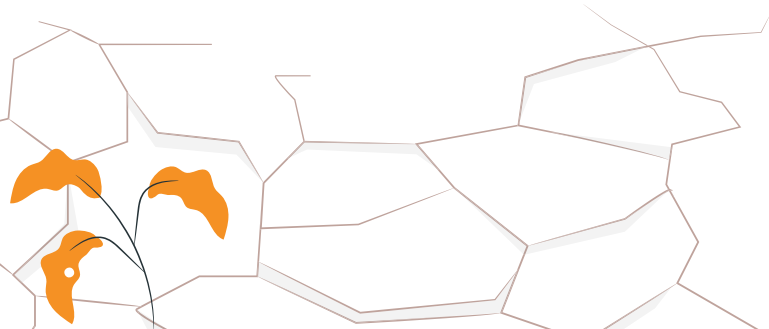
Desertification often leads to water scarcity, which affects women's ability to access clean water for domestic use, irrigation and livestock.

Women in rural areas spend up to six hours a day collecting water in dryland areas. As water becomes scarce, women are often forced to travel longer distances to fetch water, which becomes increasingly difficult when water sources dry up or become contaminated, thus increasing women's workload and exposing them to greater risks.

Loss of biodiversity



Land degradation can lead to the loss of biodiversity, including the extinction of plant and animal species. This loss can have a disproportionate impact on women, who rely on biodiversity for food, medicine and other resources.



Health issues



Desertification can have negative health impacts, particularly on women and children. Women who spend more time outside are at a higher risk of contracting vector-borne diseases, such as Leishmaniasis - Gerbilus vector - a disease transmitted by desert rodents, whose numbers expand with increasing desertification. Poisonous snakes and scorpions common in desert ecosystems are also a public health risk for women and children. Dust storms and air pollution can lead to respiratory problems, while water scarcity and poor sanitation can lead to water-borne diseases. Moreover, as a result of their poor consumption patterns, women are more predisposed to micronutrient and vitamin deficiencies.

Land degradation and desertification aggravate existing multidimensional poverty, thus limiting food availability, disrupting its accessibility and utilization, and reducing its sustainability. Consequently, women are predisposed to micronutrient and vitamin deficiencies, and increased obesity and malnutrition rates. Iron deficiency anaemia, especially among pregnant women, is a major public health issue in the Arab region. Almost a third of women of reproductive age in Arab countries suffered from anaemia in 2019, with higher rates in Arab LDCs (38.5 per cent) and conflict-affected countries (39.5 per cent), and slightly lower rates in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (27.1 per cent) and middle-income countries (30.3 per cent).³

Migration



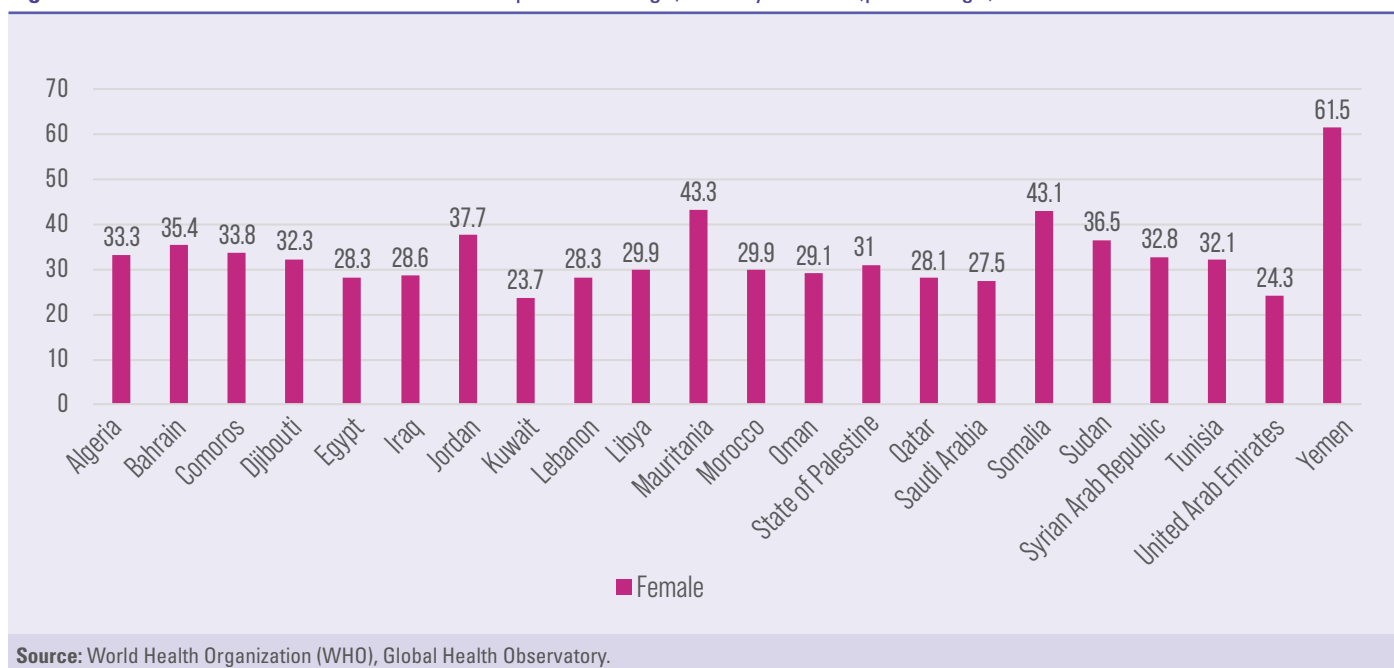
As land degradation makes it more difficult to earn a living from agriculture, and with the increasing effects of natural disasters such as floods and droughts, women and their families may be forced to migrate in search of better opportunities. Migration can be particularly difficult for women, who may face discrimination and gender-based violence in new environments. Furthermore, women often bear the pressures of displacement when left behind to manage households and care for children.

Food insecurity



Land degradation affects agriculture, leading to reduced crop yields and food shortages. Women, who are often responsible for food production and processing, are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. When crops fail, women may spend more time searching for food, further increasing their workload. Women present higher rates than men of nutrition-related health issues, such as obesity (figure 4), which could be explained by sociocultural factors, including the expectation that men and children are given the best and most nutritious parts of the meal.



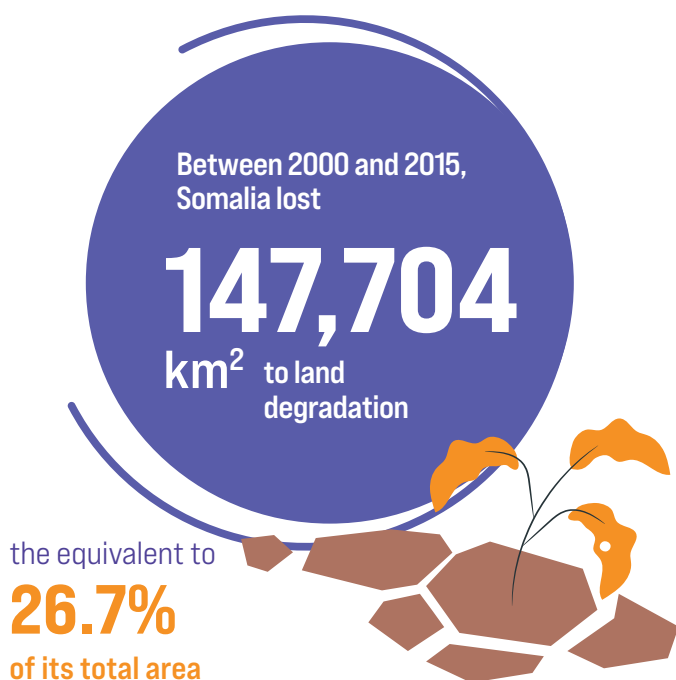
Figure 3. Prevalence of anaemia in women of reproductive age, 15–49 years old (percentage)

In all Arab countries, obesity rates are higher among women than men, with Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia presenting the biggest disparities owing to unhealthy food consumption patterns or lifestyles.

Women are often overlooked in policies and programmes related to land degradation. Land degradation impacts women's traditional responsibilities and roles in agriculture and natural resource management. Women's voices and perspectives are often not included in decision-making processes related to land

use and management. Many gender-blind policies and programmes on land use and management do not consider gender differences, and may unintentionally exacerbate existing inequalities. Customary laws and cultural norms can hinder women from exercising their right to property ownership and inheritance, causing them to lose their entitlements. This is particularly common in rural areas where land grabbing by male relatives happens following the death of a husband or father. In some cases, widows without children may be denied access to their late husband's land.

Figure 4. Prevalence of obesity among adults, BMI \geq 30 (percentage)



Box 1. Women in Somalia are at the forefront of drought impacts

Somalia is experiencing one of the worst droughts in 40 years. With five failed rainy seasons by the end of 2022, almost 9 million Somalis have been affected, with over 5 million suffering from acute food insecurity, and over 1 million displaced. Between 2000 and 2015, Somalia lost 147,704 km² to land degradation, the equivalent to 26.7 per cent of its total area. Somali women and girls are particularly affected by these events, and are exposed to higher risks of malnutrition: they are often the last to eat and the first to skip meals at home during droughts. They are also forced to walk greater distances in search of water, exposing them to greater risks of violence. Although all people's livelihoods are disrupted during droughts, unlike men, Somali women face additional restrictions on their mobility, and in accessing certain types of jobs, capital and business networks, leading to a higher risk of losing income, especially in female-headed households.

Source: Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Food Inequality Report, 2023; World Bank Blogs, Marking International Women's Day: Why women and girls matter in Somalia's climate crisis, 2022.

Ultimately, addressing this issue requires a gender-sensitive approach that recognizes and focuses on the specific needs and concerns of women in the Arab region. This can include promoting women's participation in decision-making processes, increasing their access to resources, and developing policies and programmes that are gender-sensitive and culturally appropriate.

Box 2. Agreements including women signatories: more likely to be implemented

Of 130 peace agreements signed between 1990 and 2014, only 13 included women signatories. Agreements signed by women are more sustainable, and include provisions that are more likely to be implemented within 10 years when compared with those that did not include women signatories. Allowing women to participate in peace negotiations is associated with a 35 per cent increase in the likelihood of an agreement lasting for at least 15 years. Even when women are not signatories, their involvement in negotiations increases the chances of reaching an agreement, and has a significant impact on bringing about fundamental reforms across different sectors.

Source: International Food Policy Research Institute, Global food policy report 2023: Rethinking food crisis responses, 2023.



3. Women empowerment can improve livelihoods in rural communities while combatting desertification

Empowering women is crucial to improving livelihoods, not only for women but also for their families and rural communities in the Arab region. By giving women equal opportunities, access to resources and a platform to voice their concerns, they can contribute significantly to economic growth and development. Women's equality in agrifood systems could boost the global economy by \$1 trillion, reducing the number of food insecure people by 45 million.⁴

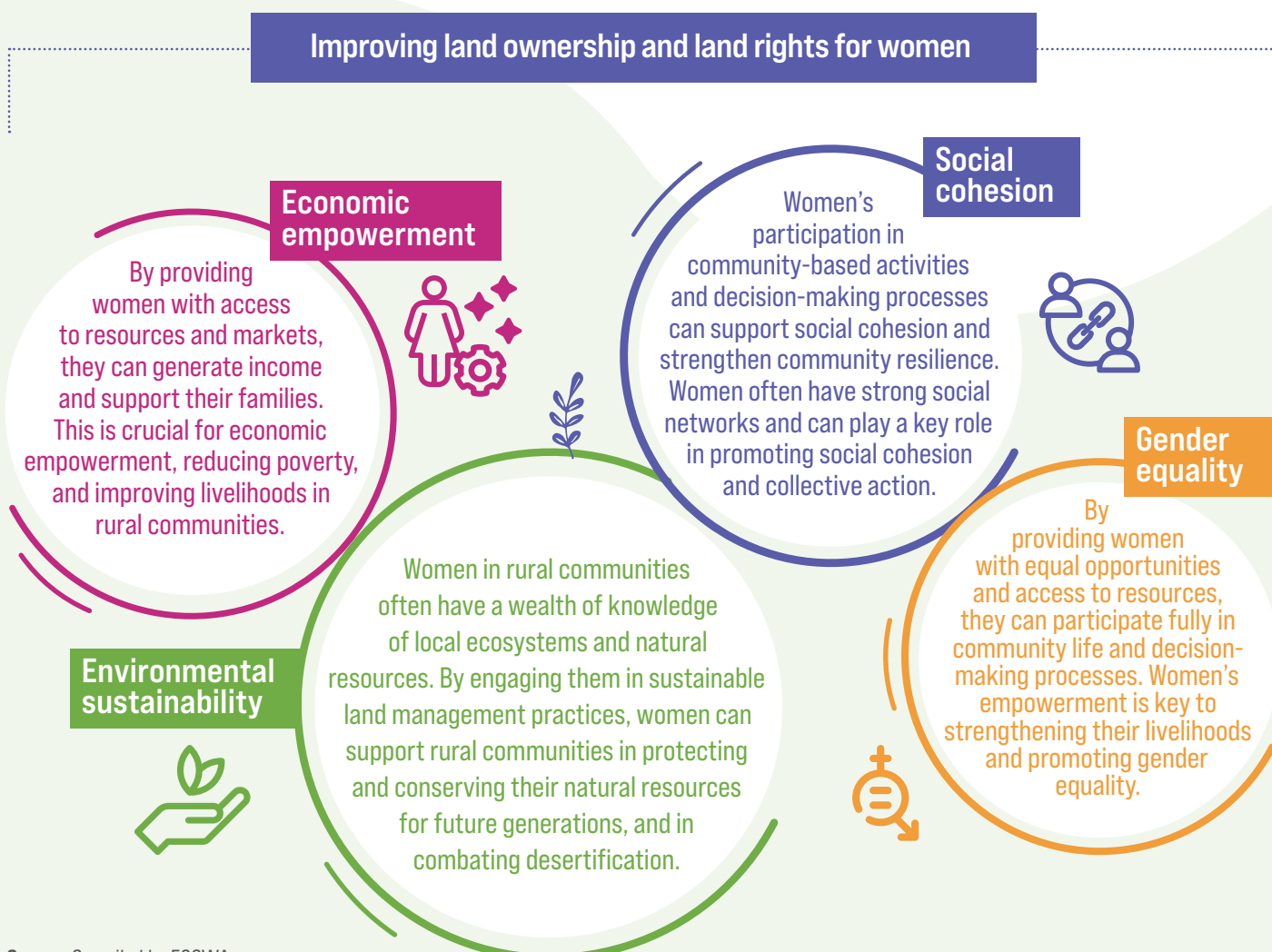
Investing in women's livelihoods and strengthening their land rights are essential for achieving sustainable development in the Arab region. This requires policies and programmes that promote gender-sensitive approaches to rural development and prioritize the needs of rural women.

Box 3. For the first time: land distributed equally among men and women in Morocco

For over a decade now, Sulaliyyate rural women in Morocco have been advocating for their rights to own land and property. In 2018, for the first time, the Government distributed 860 plots of land equally between men and women as part of a larger effort to privatize 15 million hectares of land in the country.

In 2019, Parliament passed law 62-17, affirming that members of ethnic communities, both men and women, can obtain usufruct of all community properties to which they belong. It also stipulates that woman can benefit equally at the level of land division and can obtain, like men, compensations for real estate transactions in the land of Sulaliyyate groups, whether through a partnership, lease or assignment. The most significant aspect of this law is the acknowledgment of women's land rights by men who previously refused to recognize them. Now, some men are even supporting their female family members, daughters and sisters in obtaining their rights.

Source: Al Safir, Sulaliyyate Women in Morocco: this land is ours, 2022.



Source: Compiled by ESCWA.

Women in the Arab region are taking a proactive role in adapting to the impacts of desertification and promoting sustainable practices. These efforts not only help to maintain their livelihoods, but also contribute to the resilience of their communities and the environment.

The Regional Initiative to Promote Small-Scale Renewable Energy Applications in Rural Areas of the Arab Region (REGEND) initiative demonstrated the importance of involving women in efforts to combat desertification, and to promote sustainable use of land and natural resources practices. Empowering women with knowledge, skills and resources can have a significant impact on the livelihoods of communities and on the environment.



Ms. Bougtif's farm in Chorbane, Tunisia

Box 4. ESCWA empowering women towards sustainable land use

ESCWA, through REGEND, helped rural women entrepreneurs and farmers overcome water scarcity and poverty by reducing their reliance on State electricity grids, establishing efficient irrigation systems, and promoting income-generating activities. A series of activities and workshops were implemented in Lebanon, Jordan and Tunisia, which directly targeted women working in the agricultural sector. The following are some highlights from the project:

- In Tunisia, a solar photovoltaic water pumping system was installed on Ms. Bougtif's farm in Chorbane. The availability of additional irrigation water from this pumping system expanded cultivated areas and generated higher income. Ms. Bougtif, who currently cultivates 4 hectares of land, is considering cultivating new vegetable crops in 4–8 hectares of neighbouring land.
- In Lebanon, the Women Agri-food Cooperative of Akkar Al-Atika recorded an increase in revenues of approximately 25 per cent, despite increased prices of vegetables and fruits used for agrifood production. Support provided through the project and related workshops reduced operating costs and enabled the Cooperative to maintain lower prices than the market by 34–62 per cent.

Source: REGEND, Social, economic, and environmental impact assessment report, 2022



Policy recommendations: we all have a role to play

1

Empowering women with knowledge, skills and resources to address the root causes of land degradation and desertification, and to achieve sustainable development.



2

Developing gender-sensitive policies and programmes on desertification to address the specific needs and challenges faced by women and girls in rural areas.



3

Mainstreaming gender justice and measures to combat land degradation and desertification into national development policies, and prioritizing development paths that consider potential risks to enhance the durability of recovery efforts.



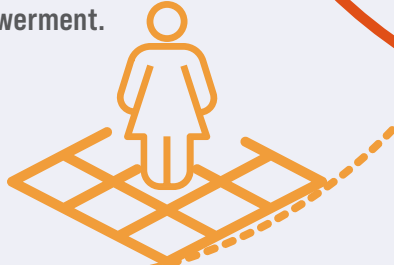
4

Undertaking regional and inter-regional assessments to better understand transboundary risks, such as those resulting from sand and dust storms, and to identify possible areas for regional collaboration to mitigate those risks.



5

Protecting and promoting women's land rights, given that secure land tenure is essential for sustainable land use practices and economic empowerment.



6

Promoting women's leadership in the implementation of climate smart agriculture techniques in arid and semi-arid areas.



7

Supporting the participation of women in global forums and meetings, and giving them a seat at the table to discuss and engage in major global and regional environmental issues.



8

Ensuring that policies address women's ownership and access to productive and other resources, such as extension services and farm inputs that are provided to men in the same communities.



9

Enhancing investment in preventive measures to reduce desertification through adequate land management, land use and land governance to prevent further land degradation.



Endnotes

- 1 Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.
- 2 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Gender and Land Rights Database.
- 3 Computed from World Health Organization, Global Health Observatory.
- 4 FAO, The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems, 2023.



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