Fatima, Danniyeh, 25.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

WOMEN'S VOICES IN THE AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD SECTORS IN LEBANON

STUDY CONDUCTED UNDER THE UN WOMEN'S PRODUCTIVE SECTORS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (PSDP)

Written by: **Nur Turkmani**

AUGUST 2022

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A programme by UN Lebanon

In **partnership** with Canada

UN WOMEN

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STUDY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Lea, St. Rafqa monastery, 23.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

1 INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

"I swear to God, most days I work sixteen hours. I wake up in the morning to check the land and see what my fruits and vegetables need. Then I clean the house and wake the children up for school and see what they need. I'm back on the land immediately after ploughing the soil, cutting leaves, planting, harvesting, you name it. Nowadays I have to also collect water in the heat for my plants and trees. Then I have to deal with these crooked traders because my husband is too unwell to do so himself. Then I have to cook. Then clean. I need more hours in a day!"

- Fatima, Lebanese farmer in Akkar, mother of eight

As Lebanon continues to sink deeper into a complex economic and political crisis—one with significant repercussions on food sovereignty and production—the question of agriculture and industrial production has become particularly relevant. The mainstream discourse has continued to perpetuate the notion of sustainable agriculture and agri-food production as one of the country's critical ways forward. Naturally, this is complicated given the agriculture sector's historical weakness, the existing crisis and its impact on businesses and trade, and geographic and political imbalances across the country.

Amid this context, the question of women's role in productive sectors, especially in the agriculture sector, continues to resurface. For decades, women have been critical but invisible actors within the sector. They have been involved in a range of different activities—dairy production and sales, tobacco cultivation, oil pressing, greenhouse management, fruits and vegetable production, among many others.

Ultimately the agriculture sector means different things to different women across the country. There are informal agricultural workers, often Syrian refugee women, spending long hours under the sun rolling stems and spraying fertilisers. These workers are underpaid and oftentimes subjected to verbal, and sometimes even physical, abuse from landlords. Meanwhile, there are young Lebanese female graduates attempting to start agri-food enterprises and or community farm projects throughout urban and rural areas, while middle-aged Lebanese and Palestinian women lead agri-food processing cooperatives. All this to say, the impact of the economic crisis, and the navigation of the agriculture sector, varies significantly depending on a woman's socio-economic background, nationality, and location.

Within this dynamic context, and under the Lebanon Recovery Fund, UN Women is supporting a joint programme in Lebanon: The Productive Sectors Development Programme (PSDP). The programme is funded by Canada and implemented by a consortium of six UN Agencies and coordinated by the Resident Coordinator Office. The overall purpose of the joint programme is to support gender-responsive job creation and economic opportunities in the agriculture and agri-food sectors that prioritise women in disadvantaged areas.

Exploring and probing into gendered issues within the agriculture sector in Lebanon's current period of flux is crucial. Historically, women in the agriculture sector have been affected by issues of land ownership inequality; cultural and social stereotypes that hinder women's involvement in the sector; obstacles for women leadership positions and decision-making input; and family-related duties that stall women's active participation (LRI, 2019; FAO, 2021; UNDP, 2018). Within this context, and under the PDSP, a gender analysis has been conducted to examine socio-economic aspects of women's participation in the North, specifically within the fruits and vegetables value chain.

Broadly, the study explores the multi-layered gender dimensions of the agriculture sector in Lebanon to understand how the current financial crisis

intersects with longstanding issues and how this affects the safety and well-being of women and other vulnerable groups. The main research questions are the following:

I. What is the current role and capacity of women within the value chain (specifically in the North and during the crisis)?

- Which function are the women mostly concentrated in (business ownership, harvesting, production, etc.)?
- What is the role of women in the decision-making process of the business?
- What are the skillsets and educational levels (stratified by position within the value chain segment)?

II. What are the challenges that exist that hinder women's full economic empowerment within this value chain?

- What are the current challenges in the business and economic environments that impede women's growth in the sector?
- What are the challenges perceived by women to be impeding their professional growth in the sector?

III. How can women be supported to be fully economically empowered within this value chain?

- What productive assets do women have access to that they can utilise independently?
- What social, technical, social care and financial services are needed (stratified by position within the value chain segment)?

1.1 The agriculture and agri-food sectors within an economic crisis: informal, fragmented, and struggling to survive

The contrast between Lebanon's physical landscape and its actual economic reality is stark. Its agriculture, despite Lebanon's small size, is rather diverse. Lush mountains with rich soil stretch over 70% of the country's total area (GIZ, 2014). The land itself benefits from a relatively moderate climate and sufficient water resources especially in comparison to the region. There are a range of different topographies and climatic zones with an alternation between lowlands and highlands, enabling the production of a range of fruits and vegetables.

However, 1% of landowners control over a quarter of the country's overall agricultural land surface and while agriculture accounts for 30-40% of the population's main source of income, only around 3.6% of employed people work in agriculture (CAS, 2020). In line with the country's imbalanced and sectarian political economy (Majed, 2017; Salloukh, 2019), the large holdings are often under the purview of the political elite who oversee exports, businesses, and trade. Most of the country's land is made of small agricultural holdings that are highly informal and undercapitalised, and with little access to markets (Hamade, 2020). The country's agricultural lands are quite scattered and fragmented, and are often not financially lucrative (AFD, 2020). Small scale farmers are thus very sensitive to the continuous fluctuations of prices and the uncertainty of the market and are often in need of further investment and support. An older study indicates that in Lebanon, there is a direct connection between agriculture and poverty and that those working in agriculture are likely to be among the most impoverished and vulnerable groups in the country (Lampietti, Michaels and Mansour, 2010). Reports of farmers and agricultural workers today also sound the alarm on their dire situation within the current economic crisis (Sewell, 2020), noting that the highest poverty rates in the country are within the agriculture sector (LCRP, 2020).

Meanwhile Lebanon's agriculture sector has historically relied on imports for consumption with a nearly 80% food-dependence (FAO, 2021). This is in large part because the country's political economy, following the 1950s, did not focus on rural development and local production, instead shifting toward a service-oriented economy (Simitian, 2020; Al Dirani et al., 2021). In this context, food production was mostly geared towards regional trade instead of local sustainability. Even under the Chehabist reforms, which were an attempt to address rural-urban inequalities, the agriculture sector remained largely stagnant. Consequently, the country witnessed huge migration towards Beirut and increased urbanisation and geographic segmentations (Hamade, 2020). Until today, there is no coherent and practical nation-wide vision for

the country's agriculture sector and a lot of its evolution or changes is based on non-state actors. The World Bank estimated Lebanon's GDP at 54.96 USD billion in 2018, of which only 3% of it was reliant on agriculture, forestry, and fishing (World Bank, 2018). Nominal GDP shrunk to an estimated 21.8 billion in 2021, indicating very significant contractions in the economy in a very short period of time (World Bank, 2021). Meanwhile until today the government allocates a budget of not more than 1% to the agriculture sector (FAO, 2021).

This is within a context whereby almost all industries in Lebanon are gauged to be, in one form or the other, on the brink of collapse (World Bank, 2021). Over the past three years, and due to one of the world's worst financial crises, the country has witnessed an exponential devaluation of the Lebanese Pounds (LBP) in comparison to the United States Dollars (USD). The currency devaluation has led to a severe humanitarian crisis: severe shortages in capital, hospital equipment and medicine, fuel, bread, and of course human resources. According to an updated report by the World Food Programme's (WFP), there are around 3,563,300 people in Lebanon who need assistance (WFP, 2022). Further, an ESCWA-commissioned study indicates that Lebanon's rate of multidimensional poverty—a measurement of poverty that looks at income, health, assets and property, employment, education, and public utilities—increased from 42% in 2019 to 82% in 2021 (ESCWA 2021). A WFP study (2020, as cited in FAO, 2021) notes that one out of three Lebanese have become unemployed following the pandemic, and one in five have experienced a salary reduction. This was particularly the case in Akkar, and for young women between the ages of 25-34 years, as well as refugees (WFP, 2020). Another more updated survey by the ILO (2022) indicates that Lebanon's unemployment rate surged from 11.4% in 2018-2019 to almost 30% in 2022, with a higher rate of unemployment among women (32.7%) than men (28.4%). Syrian refugee women are among the most insecure group in the country, especially those living in rural areas (VASyR, 2021), with findings showing that only 10% of refugee women are in the labour force (World Bank 2020b). Generally, Syrian and Palestinian refugees, both men and women, were heavily impacted by the economic crisis. Unemployment rates increased to 40.1% for Syrian refugees and 58.5% of Palestinian refugees, and job informality among refugees are at a staggering 95 and 94% respectively (ILO, 2022).

The August 2020 Beirut blast, coupled with other political and security clashes, such as the Tleil explosion in Akkar, have also accelerated the crisis. Meanwhile the 2011 war in Syria continues to have major consequences for Lebanon both politically and in terms of the large numbers of refugees residing in a country with historically weak infrastructure and little to no political will to respond to the needs of refugees (Geha & Talhouk, 2019). Lebanon remains the country hosting the highest number of refugees per capita in the world, with around 1.5 million Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2022), 90% of whom are significantly impoverished and have serious protection concerns (UN, 2022).

However, over the past decade, and particularly in the couple of years following the crisis, there have been growing investments and renewed interests in the sector (Mukkahal et al., 2022; Hamade & Turkmani, 2022). International organisations, donors, and private sector entities have turned to the agriculture sector as a key opportunity for addressing many of the country's needs. Lebanon's industrial sector has also been a pillar amid the crisis, as it continues to employ a significant portion of the population, contribute to the national economy, and enable the provision of needed hard currency through export (EBRD, 2021). According to Fahed-Sreih (2021), there are over 4,700 industrial firms in Lebanon, the largest portion of which is in agri-food production (26 percent or 1,245 firms), followed by construction materials (12 percent) and chemical products (8 percent).

While there has been interest in the agriculture and agri-food sectors, as well as an observable increase of women in the field, the agriculture sector is struggling to survive. Farmers are under a slew of financial and social pressures explored in the sections below.

The industrial sector, as well, is constrained by the limitations of the Lebanese economy, i.e., the small size of the national market; unreliable supplies and high costs of utilities (in particular electricity) and infrastructure; the inadequate provision of business support services; the non-conducive institutional and regulatory framework, and the absence of an overall policy/strategic frame. It is further constrained by the obstacles generally faced by the

SME sector, in terms of weak capacities to invest, the mass exodus of youth, the unavailability of specialised skills and the absence of modern business management capabilities.

1.2 Snapshot of gender issues

For decades, women in Lebanon have been an integral part of a feminist and intersectional grassroots movement that has paved way for legal and socio-economic changes. Women have been a leading force in local mobilisation, civil society networks, private enterprises, the education and health sectors, among others. There have been a lot of positive legal reforms and sociocultural changes that have taken place, from laws to protect against domestic violence and sexual harassment, to increased female participation, education levels, and political engagement (UN Women & World Bank, 2021).

At the same time, despite these strides, the political and developmental reality portray a grim picture. The 2019 OECD report (OECD Development Centre, 2019) reports Lebanon's high levels of gender inequality, assigning the country a Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) value, which reflects discriminations in laws, cultural norms, and everyday practices. The 2020 WEF Gender Gap also posits Lebanon as a country with one of the highest rates of gender inequality in 2020. Despite women's intrinsic role in politics, they remain highly underrepresented in the parliament or government cabinets. Moreover, many crucial laws remain regressive: the nationality law, which prevents women from passing down their nationality to their children; the personal status laws which govern marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody, etc, and are often discriminatory toward women; and the criminal law which offers minimal legal protection for women in situations of marital rape, preventing them as well from abortion (for more, see Geha 2018; Mikdashi, 2020; HRW, 2020).

The crisis has led to an estimated 63% increase in unemployment among women in 2020 (Salti & Mezher, 2020). Moreover, more women have reported losing their jobs than men, and a higher number of women have experienced income reductions amid the crisis (UN Women, NCLW, UNFPA, &WHO 2020). CAS (2020) also indicates a gender pay gap in Lebanon with men earning 6.5% more than women for the same position or job. This percentage increases to about 11.6% for non-Lebanese employees.

The CAS (2020) report indicates that in terms of skilled agricultural labour, men are 3% more active and present than women (1%), and within this category, the gender pay gap is at its highest. It is important to note that in 2000, the Labour Code was modified to ensure equal pay for women and an extended maternity leave. Moreover, as per Article 26, women should not be discriminated against based on "the type of work, the amount of remuneration, employment, promotion, vocational training, and clothing."

Generally, employment regulations in Lebanon are not actively discriminatory toward women but the way in which regulations, welfare, protection, and laws are set up are skewed in favour of men (UN Women, 2016). Even if employment regulations do not distinguish between sexes, they are set within a larger legal and political context that perpetuate gender inequality (FTL, 2022). This renders the reform of the labour code weak and limited as the private sector, in practice, does not necessarily abide by the equal pay requirement. Additionally, although maternity leave was increased to ten weeks within the Labour Code, it is still well below the ILO's recommendation of 18 weeks, and also does not include provisions for paternity leave or mandated child-care.

Though nationwide gender disaggregated data remains fragmented, women's participation in the agriculture and agri-food sector is loosely estimated between 10 to 40% (CAS, 2019; FTL, 2022). A key number of issues affect women's involvement in the agriculture sector—the lack of information pertaining to women's engagement in agricultural work; land ownership inequality; cultural and social stereotypes that hinder women's involvement in the sector; obstacles for women leadership positions and decision-making input; and family-related duties that stall women's active participation (LRI, 2018; UNDP, 2020). Another key reason for women's marginalisation in Lebanon's agriculture sector is that not enough incentives have been provided to them (FAO, 2021).

Despite these barriers, women have long been active members of the agriculture sector—contributing to at least one third of the labour needed in agricultural productions. However, as previously

noted, their work is often invisible and unaccounted for (UN Women, 2016; UNDP, 2020). Rural women, as per a study by Fair Trade Lebanon (2022), make up around 9% of farm owners in Lebanon and focus mainly on dairy production, subsistence farming, and preservation of food. Rural women's work, particularly that of Syrian refugee women, is seasonal, informal, and often part-time. Syrian refugee women in Lebanon often face dire protection issues while working on the field and are constrained by very limited legal and political frameworks for support (for more, see Hamade & Turkmani, 2019). Moreover, when women farmers or agricultural workers, whether Lebanese or Syrian, generate income, it is often used for household consumption instead of trading, investing, or participating in the market (UN-ESCWA, 2009). In line with the finding that women are paid less than men for the same job, an ILO study (2017) focusing on agricultural value chains in the North of Lebanon finds that women are paid less than men in the production value chain. Another study indicates significant differences were observed in terms of women being able to access productive resources: a mere 13 to 15% of Lebanese women could access irrigation sources and agricultural inputs (FTL, 2022). Very few to no women had access to necessary equipment and tools, as well as information on best agricultural practices, or business support and rural incubators (FTL, 2022).

The challenges women face in the agriculture sector are part of broader systemic issues women in Lebanon face. This brief overview shows that there are legal, social, and political shortcomings which naturally affect women's economic participation and empowerment both within the country but also specifically the agriculture sector.

1.3 Policy Context

The Ministry of Agriculture is the main governmental institution overlooking and managing the country's agriculture sector. Its mandate extends to the following:

- Regulation of the agriculture sector across the different supply chains, i.e., production, processing, distribution, marketing.
- Implementation, monitoring, and oversight over laws, policies, and regulations
- Advocating for and supporting the sector's development through extension services, coordination of agriculture projects, and extensive research (data disaggregation, statistics, and socioeconomic studies)

The Ministry has three institutions underneath it, or connected to it, that are relevant for this study: the Lebanese Agriculture Research Institute (LARI), the Green Plan Authority (which supports farm-level infrastructure financially and technically), and the General Directorate for Cooperatives. Regarding the latter, there are a total of 1,350 cooperatives in Lebanon, of which 1,086 of them are agricultural (FAO, 2022). According to an ILO report (2018), "half of the registered cooperatives (51 per cent) are agricultural cooperatives and around a quarter (27 per cent) work in agro-food sector, of which 125 registered women cooperatives, most of them produce Lebanese traditional food products." Meanwhile, interviews with agriculture experts indicate that the number of operational and active women-led agricultural cooperatives has likely increased to around 200, especially if considering non-registered and informal cooperatives. The exact number, however, requires further research.

The MoA provides subsidies to cooperatives through subsidy schemes. However, research shows that the program is not transparent and that, in fact, many of the registered cooperatives are "fake" and managed by a small group of people for the sake of accessing subsidies and other funds (ILO, 2018; Scolding & Nour, 2020).

Over the past couple of years, particularly prior to the implosion of the economic crisis, the agriculture sector witnessed policies and approaches that were more gender sensitive and intersectional in their approach. International organisations, community groups, and national entities are working to ensure that gender sensitivity and mainstreaming are considered within the agriculture sector.

Notably, both the Ministry of Agriculture Strategy (MoA, 2020-2025) and the National Forest Plan (NFP, 2015-2025), for instance, are cross-cutting in their approach, as they incorporate gender sensitivity and mainstream gender issues within their policy documents. The updated version of the MoA's strategy embeds gender-sensitivity and people-focused as key guiding principles. Across most of its pillars of intervention, the MoA strategy

highlights its plan to engage with gender equality and mainstreaming. Its second pillar, for instance, focuses on agricultural production and productivity. Within that pillar, the strategy acknowledges the need to "mainstream a gender approach by focusing on the inclusion of women in agricultural production, processing and marketing being essential and needs to be valorised" (p. 29). Additionally, it also mainstreams gender in its fifth pillar, which pertains to improving the agriculture sector's institutions and overall environment through "ensuring a widespread mainstreaming of a gender-sensitive and inclusive approach" (p. 34). The strategy's indicators are also gender and age disaggregated. This is in stark comparison to an earlier version of the MoA's strategy (2015-2020), which had very limited references to women and youth. It mainly acknowledged women as a vulnerable category in need of financial support. Meanwhile, the NFP incorporated findings from a gender-focused study with the aim of understanding how best to target women and engage them in forest-related affairs. The NPF discusses women's roles and socioeconomic vulnerabilities in the forestry sector, and advocates for empowering women's participation and leadership. It also promotes assessments that mainstream gender as well as gender-disaggregated indicators.

Relevantly, the National Observatory for Women in Agriculture and Rural Areas (NOWARA), which focuses on gender policies, was launched in 2007. The project was implemented by CIHEAM-IAM Bari (Centre International de Hautes Etudes Agronomiques Méditerranéennes – Institut Agronomique Méditerranéen) and the MoA and was financed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs/ Directorate General for Development Cooperation. The unit was focused on women entrepreneurship; innovative dynamics that would draw in women to work in the agricultural sector; knowledge production and sharing; national recognition of women's role in formal and informal sectors; increased decision-making and participation of women with regards to rural policies and decision-making; and expansion of partnerships and networking between various stakeholders. NOWARA was most active between 2007-2014, producing key studies, a series of three books for schools across the country, and implementing initiatives for both rural empowerment and urban entrepreneurial skills (FAO, 2021).

Meanwhile, water resource management and irrigation programs are under the Litani River Authority and subsidy programs are under the Ministry of Economy's mandate. The Investment Development Authority of Lebanon (IDAL) supports agricultural exports while food safety is mandated by three ministries: MoA, the Ministry of Health (MoH), and the Ministry of Economy and Trade (MoET).

In addition to the aforementioned ministries, the Ministry of Industry (MoI) plays a key role in the agri-food sector. MoI contributes to the overall development and activation of industrial sectors and supervises relevant laws and regulations. Some of its relevant responsibilities include promoting small and medium enterprises; providing relevant industrial statistics as a reference for relevant stakeholders; and overlooking inspections, measures, and sanctions with regards to industrial establishments. inspecting, inspection, measures, and sanctions applied against the industrial establishments.

Other key stakeholders for the agri-food industry include the Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture, the Association of Lebanese Industrialists (ALI), the Syndicate of Agri-food Traders in Lebanon, and the Syndicate of Lebanese Food Industries (SLFI).

May, Tripoli, 25.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

2 METHODOLOGY

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Data collection recap

This study is based on a qualitative research methodology. In summary, a total of 37 in-depth interviews were conducted, as well as one validation focus-group with women entrepreneurs and farmers, and four ethnographic site visits to women's workplaces.

The in-depth interviews were with a range of stakeholders including community members (activists, farmers, small and micro enterprises, cooperatives, agricultural workers, etc.), larger agricultural firms, local authorities, agriculture and employment experts and professors, and NGO and INGO staff. However, interviews were primarily focused on women whose lives are directly affected by and connected to the agriculture and agri-food sectors. The women targeted were diverse and included Lebanese and Syrians from both rural and urban areas in the North of Lebanon, with different socioeconomic backgrounds including both high and low levels of education. Data collection also targeted women actors along the value chain: i.e., suppliers, producers, processors, wholesale/distributors, and retailers. A crucial element of the study was to capture the voices of women: their perspective on the agriculture and agri-food sector, and how they have responded to the economic crisis. The report relies heavily on women's quotes, stories, and narrative.

The ethnographic approach was also coupled with a photojournalism component, whereby a researcher and a photographer spent a day with four UN Women beneficiaries in the North of Lebanon to capture their everyday life, struggles, and stories through portraiture and semi-structured interviews. Site visits were with a beekeeper, two agri-food entrepreneurs, and a woman currently seeking employment in the agriculture sector. The purpose of this was to capture the voices and narratives of women themselves, as this is an integral component of gender analysis (Harel and Daphna-Tekoah, 2016).

It is important to note that consent and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research and all names have been changed in the report to maintain anonymity.

2.2 Analytical framework

Two frameworks guided this study: a Gender Analysis Matrix (GAM) and a Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis (CVA). A gender analysis approach was utilised to explore inequalities, gaps, and structures in the agriculture and agri-food sectors. The analysis probed into existing gender norms, power dynamics, and socioeconomic dynamics.

The GAM employs a grassroots approach and largely focuses on social relations within a community to make sense of how different members engage with one another. How do they negotiate, what power do they have, how do they make sense of changes within and outside the community? The GAM, as noted in "A Guide to Gender-Analysis Frameworks", "is very much influenced by the reality and ideology of participatory planning; it can also accommodate the constraints imposed by shortage of funding and time, illiteracy, and insufficient or non-existent quantitative data on gender roles" (March et al., 2005). In that sense, community members illuminate the main challenges around gender roles within their community (Parker, 1993; Morgan, 2022). This also enabled an understanding of how different stakeholders, both men and women, interact with one another across the agriculture value chain.

Focusing on community members in Lebanon as the main source of knowledge providers, the matrix also probed on themes of laws, policies, regulations, and institutional practices; cultural norms and beliefs; gender roles, responsibilities, and time use; access to and control over resources; and, finally, patterns of power and decision-making.

Alongside the GAM, the CVA framework was used to identify and acknowledge the capacities and vulnerabilities of community members. The CVA's central idea is "that people's existing strengths (or capacities) and weaknesses (or vulnerabilities) determine the impact that a crisis has on them, as well as the way they respond to the crisis." This framework enabled an exploration of how different community members are responding to Lebanon's crises. It also probed into specific vulnerabilities

being exacerbated by the crisis, while also acknowledging the various ways people are using their capacities to navigate the crisis (March et al., 2005). This approach is critical as it situates community members, especially women, not as victims but rather as agents of change.

Lea, St. Rafqa monastery, 23.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

3 FINDINGS

3. FINDINGS

Men have long been perceived as the main stakeholders or "income-generators" within Lebanon's agriculture sector. Although women play critical roles in the sector, they have often been considered as "supporting hands" instead of key players, both within the production and distribution process. Until today, the majority of large-scale agriculture work and production in the North of Lebanon is, indeed, led by men whereas most women are engaged in small-scale production and informal work. However, such an observation misses the implicit and explicit engagement of women within the agriculture sector. It also does not account for the structural issues that have led to this imbalance, namely, the sectarian political economy that leads to monopolistic grips over certain industries and trades (Bauman, 2016; Assouad, 2021); legal issues, including the nationality laws, personal status laws, restrictions on social security, and limitations to the labour code (Salameh, 2015); domestic pressures and gendered expectations, among others. Majority of interviewees argue that women, if the conditions are permitting, can be as involved as men across all value chain nodes in the agriculture sector.

Interestingly, despite the many challenges women face, it appears that women's involvement in the agriculture and agri-food sectors across the North is expanding. In large part, this is a consequence of globally and locally changing trends, encouraged by feminist movements and decades of advocacy, that continue to push for gender equality. However, it is also linked to a changing economic reality, especially given Lebanon's current crisis and the exacerbation of living conditions among a significant number of households across the country. Women's economic involvement and participation remains contingent on multiple factors, such as socio-economic background, access to capital and education, nationality, and legal status, as well as women's relation to a particular function within the value chain.

The findings below are divided into three main sections. The first explores both existing and changing roles of women within the agriculture and agri-food sectors. The second looks at specific patterns that emerged during data collection. The third focuses on obstacles women face in accessing the market and sustaining employment. Obstacles tackle both the broader challenges induced by the crisis, as well as more gender-specific issues.

3.1 Roles and capacities of women within the value chain

3.1.1 Production segment

Fieldwork confirms that women are most active in the production segment of the value chain. Across the North, particularly in areas of Akkar, Minyeh, and Doniyeh, rural women—both Syrian and Lebanese, but mostly Syrian—are responsible for planting crops, seeding, pruning leaves, working in greenhouses, gathering herbs and aromatic plants, rolling stems, and spraying fertilisers[1]. According to interviews, more women are involved in harvesting land preparation than before, including watering and ploughing and irrigation. Whereas previously, such efforts were mostly done by Syrian agricultural workers, today, men and women from different backgrounds are involved in agricultural production.

Some of the main fruits and vegetables women in the North cultivate include tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers, berries, and leafy green vegetables. They also appear to increasingly gather herbs and

1 Spraying fertilisers, it is important to note, is usually done by men. Women often prepare the fertilizer but rarely do the spraying themselves. However, a number of interviewees say more women agricultural workers and farmers have been spraying fertilisers.

more women in Akkar are raising livestock. Both Lebanese and Syrian women in rural areas are also involved in olive collection and pressing, as well as wild plants gathering and harvesting.

A key difference between men and women reiterated during interviews is that men are more capable of taking on strenuous physical labour such as ploughing, sheepherding, and harvesting. Other roles that are usually men-centric include the more mechanised operations, such as irrigation and spraying. Men also are more likely to drive tractors and transport goods and services.

Nour, a head of a cooperative interviewed, says even these gendered distinctions are changing as there are technological innovations that enable women to do arduous labour on their own. Indeed, studies show that technological evolution, digitisation, and affordable machinery have the potential to enable increased participation of women within different sectors and value chains in the agriculture sector (GSMA, 2022).

Production work for small-scale family-owned land is often done by the family itself. Previously, farmers and landowners were likely to hire few Syrian agricultural workers for intensive labour. However,

"Previously, and even until today, it is extremely rare to see women driving trucks. Such an image is considered vulgar. But you know what? I fired three male drivers because they were so uncomfortable taking orders from a woman. It was hard at first, but I was determined to find a woman driver. Now our main driver is a woman, and the only obstacle is transporting food from the shop to the car, but we all help her. She's a fantastic driver."

- Tania, business owner

to cut down on costs, more households appear to undertake such work themselves. More Lebanese households who own agricultural land are engaging in small-scale production in light of food shortages and increasing food costs.

Nevertheless, the majority of large-scale production work is still done by Syrian agricultural workers in Bekaa and Akkar, a significant percentage of whom are women, including children.

"You can't make sense of Lebanon's agriculture sector without tracing the role of migrant workers in it, at least since the 20th century. Basically, without Syrian refugees there would've been no agriculture in Lebanon."

- Ahmad, Agriculture Expert

Lebanon's agriculture sector has long depended on cheap labour provided by migrants from regional areas–Palestine, Egypt, and most commonly Syria (Sajadian, 2020). **Syrian female agricultural workers often work very informally, moving from one project to the other, with very little to no protection.** The majority of Syrian women agricultural workers are hired informally by landlords to engage in such work. This is often facilitated by shaweeshes[2] within informal tented settlements (ITSs), who take commission for each labourer's daily wage. Since the refugee crisis, Syrians seeking shelter and income-generating opportunities often reside for lower costs in ITSs, and are then linked, through the shaweesh, to Lebanese landowners. Given that agricultural workers have no legal protection or social protection (see section 3.3.2), this system may lead to exploitation. Indeed, both landowners and shaweeshes have a lot of unchecked power over refugee women and may deduct wages, terminate refugees' work, and prevent employment opportunities due to personal grudges (Turkmani & Hamade, 2022; El Helou, 2014).

Due to hiking rent prices, many households, particularly female-headed ones, are pushed to leave their residential homes and seek alternatives. This has also pushed particularly vulnerable Syrian households into other negative coping mechanisms such as child labour and bonded labour within the agriculture sector. **For instance, a female-headed**

2 Shaweeshes are Syrian community managers that overlook affairs within informal tented settlements

household in Akkar interviewed had recently moved from an ITS to a small plot of land owned by a Lebanese family because they were unable to afford the monthly rent there. They erected a tent near the plot and are planting and harvesting crops for the Lebanese household in exchange for (unpaid) shelter. Key informants say there are a growing number of such cases, i.e., Syrian families leaving residential homes and ITSs to seek free shelter in exchange for agricultural work.

Young children, mostly Syrians but also including Lebanese, are engaging in production work. This includes harvesting potatoes, pruning grapes and other fruits, picking olives and other cash crops, operating machines, fertilisers and pesticides usage for long hours and little wages. Estimations indicate that the highest number of child labourers in Lebanon, around 60%, work in the agriculture sector (FAO & UNICEF, 2019). Moreover, a lot of the work is hazardous and exploitative (ILO, 2016; FAO & UNICEF, 2029). At the time of writing, for instance, videos circulated of a landowner torturing and beating young Lebanese and Syrian agricultural workers (Houssari, 2022; Megaphone, 2022). Although child labour has been on the rise in Lebanon, especially following the Syrian refugee crisis, the combination of the COVID-19 lockdown, school closures, and the dire need for income among households has increased the phenomenon[3]. World Vision (2021) conducted a survey with 776 parents across Lebanon, indicating that around 10.8% of households, both Lebanese and Syrian, have at least one child between the ages of 3-18 engaged in child labour. However, the study finds that involvement in child labour is much higher for boys than girls, and also significantly more prevalent among Syrian households in comparison to Lebanese ones. On the other hand, girls, especially in Syrian households, were significantly more likely to be involved in household chores. Indeed, a COVID-19 Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment by Plan International (2020) finds that lockdown, and more generally periods of crisis, had alarming effects on adolescent girls, as they are significantly more preoccupied with invisible forms of care labour than boys. Key informants say that due to the economic crisis, there are both higher rates of school drop-outs or transfers from private schools to overburdened public schools due to lower costs. Indeed, the Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees (VASyR, 2021) finds that the percentage of Syrian children between 6-14 years enrolling in school has dropped from 67% in 2020 to 53% in 2021.

Key informants[4] note that while child labour, informal employment, and bonded labour have long been part of Lebanon's agriculture sector, there is a significant hike in reported abuse within the agriculture sector.

3.1.2. Organic farming

More women in the North are operating small-scale organic farms, as well as processing organic fruits and vegetables into foodstuffs and other beauty or medicinal products. An agricultural engineer, Yara, who works on an organic farm between Akkar and Batroun says, "In the North area, the current trend is toward organic agriculture because its prices are competitive while its production requires less disease prevention and control inputs." In 2005, a National Organic Law was submitted to the Parliament but was only approved in 2020.

"Localist" and "health conscious" buyers make up the largest portion of organic food consumers in Lebanon (Tleis, Calieris, & Roma, 2017). These consumers, according to key informants, are often aware and socially conscientious, and willing to pay significantly higher costs, especially with the aim of supporting local farmers and workers. Indeed, organic products in Lebanon are often more expensive than non-organic products, which provide room for more profit. Their prices are competitive in comparison to imported organic products and can also find markets abroad as they are in demand in developing countries. Organic stores and initiatives – such as NABAT, Eshmoon, BIOMASS, Farm to Fork, Buzuruna Juzuruna – are becoming increasingly popular not just in Beirut but also in other cities and even villages across Lebanon. Interviewees note that the main medium for organic sales are specialised shops and home deliveries, farmers' markets, health and fair-trade shops, and increasingly

3 Lebanon's Decree No. 8987 prevents children from working in specific forms of agricultural work that are considered hazardous. However, according to the ILO (2016), there is very minimal inspection by the Ministry of Labour.

4 Informants include social workers and NGOs receiving the reports of abuse directly.

supermarket corners for healthy and organic products. The shift toward organic agriculture is part of a larger, perhaps even global, trend of catering to healthier lifestyles. Farmers in Lebanon are motivated toward organic farming for both technical reasons, including better soil, erosion control, well-being of animals; environmental sustainability and improved health; and economic motivations, such as higher income and better market opportunities abroad and in Lebanon (Naspetti, 2016). One of the main challenges, according to key informants, is that prices of organic products remain too expensive for most households in Lebanon and therefore organic produce targets a very niche population.

Other producers and agri-food processors are seeking organic products for their food stuffs, beauty products, or herbal medicine. Two interviewed women in urban areas say they use local organic products purchased from women farmers in rural areas for soap and essential oil production. Moreover, an entrepreneur interviewed notes that compost production from organic waste is an important opportunity to seize. She adds that such initiatives, especially if women-led, contribute to circular economies as they can be used as organic fertilisers later for fruit and vegetable production.

"There really is a huge opportunity to restructure the agriculture sector. Over the past year, I've learnt a lot about what sustainable agriculture really means and it feels as though we are building for a better future. This is happening because people had to find solutions to the crisis, not because they willingly wanted to be sustainable. Now across the country more women are engaging in organic agriculture, using solar panels, and thinking of better methods for waste management."

- Yara, agriculture engineer

It appears that organic farm production attracts young female farmers and agricultural engineers with an enthusiasm for innovative agriculture. Women interviewed show interest in technology-driven solutions such as vertical farming; ready-made traditional foods; environmental and social start-ups; and wastewater treatment.

Often, these women have high levels of education and are involved in a range of business development and entrepreneurship life-skills building, whether at university, private sector initiatives, training centres, or NGOs. As per the 2016 Global Gender Equality Index, Lebanon is ranked very low when it comes to political participation and economic empowerment. However, it ranks very high when it comes to women's enrolment in schools and universities (USAID, 2016). This indicates that women have high levels of education but may face barriers in accessing employment. An agriculture professor at the Lebanese University notes that the majority of his agriculture classes are attended by women, and that female students, as a rule of thumb, are more likely to be interested in organic and innovative approaches. Another agriculture trainer at a public vocational school in Akkar, Samiha, says that it has become increasingly common for women to pursue agricultural engineering in Lebanon. She gave an example of a specific training, one whereby MoA gave an avocado-growing session, and all attendees were women from Akkar, including Syrians. "This is because it is easy for women to join the agriculture sector and so they are hopeful about job prospects[5]." This pattern might be connected to the fact that men are more likely to have full-time jobs, as well as the fact that Syrian women may have higher ease of mobility since Syrian men are more likely to be stopped and searched ` checkpoints. However, such observations may also indicate that there is a growing number of women interested in pursuing jobs within the agriculture sector and that if there are adequate incentives and opportunities, they are likely to join the labour force.

3.1.3. Agri-food processing

Women appear to be increasingly active in all aspects of agri-food processing. Previously, women were mostly involved in production and food-process processing and did not engage with traders and buyers due to sociocultural norms (ILO, 2017;

5 It might also be connected to the fact that men are more likely to have full-time jobs, as well as the fact that Syrian women may have higher ease of mobility since Syrian men are more likely to be stopped and searched ` checkpoints.

FTL, 2022). Today, women are more active in marketing and distribution. Interviewees indicate that women are using online platforms, word-of-mouth, cooperative models, and informal groups to eschew the services of the middle-men and work directly with traders and buyers to enhance their bargaining power and profits.

"Women dominate in small-scale agri-food processing in the North. They are involved in everything—they obtain the raw materials and buy, as well as use, the necessary machinery. Previously, they relied on middlemen for sales but now they are the ones working directly with traders and buyers."

- Jamal, Field Officer

A number of small and medium agri-food businesses launched in Batroun, Tripoli, Akkar, Zgharta, and Bcharre. Many of these are led by women, individually or within cooperatives. They often purchase raw materials from small-scale farmers and sell to restaurants, grocery shops, online platforms, food festivals, among others. Field work illustrates women-led businesses or cooperatives making chocolate, packaging nuts and olive oil, producing different types of nut butters (peanut, almond) and marketing jams and syrups. Many of these businesses emerged with the aim of addressing the lack of products in the market due to the crisis.

"Women are more detail oriented. We understand food better, we have an intimate knowledge of it. And so, we know what spice works with what, whether to add honey or caramel to nut butters. When the crisis happened, we came up with solutions that we had inherited from our mothers and grandmothers. How to preserve food more efficiently perhaps, and how to operate without electricity, or what products to sell first as they might rot quickly, things like that."

- Nawal, head of a cooperative

Field work shows a growing trend of women in the North producing healthy food stuffs, mouneh (traditional preserved Lebanese food), and sugar-free sweets and jams. There is also a growing interest in fusion experiments especially ones that combine traditional mouneh with more novel tastes. In Tripoli, a number of small businesses are producing and successfully selling makdous with peanuts instead of walnuts, ready-made kishek, zaatar crackers, labneh twists, cheese with fruits inside, gluten free bread and dessert. Based on interviews, such enterprises have higher chances for export as there is a global trend towards healthy and locally made products, particularly those with a "twist".

There is also an increase of women-led catering services across the North. Some of these businesses prepare daily dishes and platters for delivery and liaise with delivery coordinators for larger events. Some have expanded their catering services to restaurants or formal dinners and weddings. One interviewee suggested connecting her catering business with NGOs. "I know NGOs have big fancy conferences with open-buffets," she notes. "They should have it within their protocol to only bring catering from women-led businesses."

"I trust women more for my produce. I sometimes visit women farmers in the mountainside – especially for seasonal fruits such as cherry and apricot. When I visit them, I feel like we share mutual respect and trust, where I sense that they are genuine to me and give me the best product they have at a very good price. They also connect me to honest suppliers."

- Tima, organic farmer

It appears that effective linkages have been established between agri-food processors and farmers across the country. For instance, Lina, recently launched a catering business in Tripoli. She buys her raw materials (dairy, vegetables, and fruits) from local farmers across the North in order to support them. She prefers working with women farmers, preferably those using organic methods too. Lina now delivers across Lebanon and says her business is helping support other women within the value chain. Another interviewee, Sarah, started a pasta business in Batroun.

"I saw an opportunity for this demand. Pasta in Lebanon is mostly imported. All the ravioli, actually, is from Europe and is sold for 20 USD per kilo".

- Sara, pasta business owner

After a phase of research and experimenting, Sarah started to produce and sell pasta for 7 USD a pack. Like Lina, Sarah also markets and sells her products mostly through word of mouth and social media platforms.

3.1.4. Packaging and labelling

More Lebanese women have become involved in packaging over recent years. Maya, an agricultural engineer with a packaging business, says, "Before the crisis, my team consisted of 15 male Bengalis. Now my team has grown to 25 members, 20 of whom are Lebanese women." Another interviewee, a member in a cooperative, notes that Lebanese women's involvement in packaging has increased to cut down on costs of hiring migrant labour.

Generally, interviews point to the fact that Lebanese women are being hired from Akkar to package fruits and vegetables in medium or large-scale businesses. However, these women are hired by middlemen and are often not paid as much as men for the same service. Sima, an agriculture engineer, says one of the reasons is that: "Foreign workers, including Bengali or Syrian men, tend to work harder or longer. Lebanese women have other responsibilities like childcare and so they can't work long hours." This highlights the ways in which domestic pressures and unpaid care labour, as well as the lack of childcare opportunities, may affect women's access to fair pay and general hiring trends in Lebanon. Employers might prefer to hire migrant workers who demand less pay than Lebanese male workers, but can work longer hours, and for potentially less wages, than Lebanese female workers.

There is also a growing opportunity for women's involvement in the labelling process of products. A number of women-led cooperatives and agri-food processors say that they are labelling products themselves. However, oftentimes, ingredients, expiry dates, and logo designs are not properly included. Ahmad, an agriculture expert notes, "Once, at a festival, a cooperative's jam brands were criticised because of wrong grammar. Such things might not seem like a big deal, but they ultimately affect sales and reputation." This indicates a need for further training in appropriate labelling, whether by hand or relevant machinery.

3.1.5. Marketing and distribution

The role and involvement of women in the agriculture sector becomes slightly more limited at later stages of the value chain. Despite the strides made by women in marketing and distribution, field work shows that these segments are still relegated to men—husbands, middlemen, or tradesmen—who continue to negotiate prices, sell products, and oversee large-scale distribution.

A recurring challenge women say they have is the capacity to create linkages with traders and wholesalers. Interviewees say this is an area that is dominated by men mostly because of long standing connections between men farmers and wholesale markets. Wholesalers, according to interviewees, also tend to prefer working with men because of shared political or tribal connections. While some women have experience in exporting their products, most interviews are limited to sales within local areas. When asked why, many say something along the lines of, "We're not sure what to do" or "We struggle with negotiation." This indicates that women still do not have proper incentives, information, or support with marketing their products for export. It also indicates the challenge women face negotiating or bargaining within the marketplace as they may lack the necessary knowledge and social, even political, connections that men tend to have easier access to. Thus, improving women's negotiation and access to information – whether through improved streams of financial and market-oriented knowledge, increased social and political capital and networks, more active cooperatives and informal women-led groups, and specialised support on pricing and communication[6] – is critical.

6 Specialised support may also include role-playing discussions that might emerge between women farmers and traders, in order to enable women to practice their communication skills.

"Women producers and cooperatives still do not have the support and incentives to export goods on their own, and they often have to rely on existing entities for support with bureaucracy and red tape. This costs both money and time. It is critical that cooperatives are able to build direct connections with export markets abroad."

- Sadim, Agriculture Expert

The limited presence of women within the marketing and distribution segment of the value chain elucidates one of women's main challenges within the agriculture sector – navigating perceived gendered stereotypes that pit women as invisible and quiet. During a discussion with Basima, a woman agricultural worker, she gives an example of a Lebanese female farmer, Kholoud. Basima says, "I admire Kholoud because she is a very powerful women – she is not afraid to raise her voice when needed, or to stop middlemen from cheating her." Basima continues that Kholoud made her realise that women, too, could become in leadership positions. However, Basima says it is different for Syrian women because "if they raise their voices, the shaweesh can kick them out, or the landowner can immediately find a replacement." This conversation with Basima alludes to several critical themes when reflecting on women's roles within the agriculture value chain. One is how influential women in leadership positions are, if only for normalising it among community members. Building on this, it is critical for interventions by NGOs, cooperatives, and other initiatives to include discussions with local community leaders who can share their narrative with others within that community. These conversations, moreover, should include both men and women in order for men to be privy to the particular gendered challenges women face. However, it is also important for interventions to situate "leadership" and understand that it is both applied and received differently depending on the context. Thus, as Basima's example shows, enforcing empowerment without assessing the cultural and legal context of women might leader to gender-related risks and exacerbate violence and unemployment.

Interviews indicate that women-led cooperatives in Lebanon are mostly exporting mouneh and other products such as olive oil, condiments, grapes, tahini, Za'atar, pastries, fruits, nuts, and nut butters to a growing number of markets in Europe, the Gulf, and North America. However, cooperatives face administrative challenges with exports and often have to rely on intermediaries and additional institutional services for support.

"The only time I ask for support from my husband is with negotiation. [My middleman] always tries to give me lower prices because I'm a woman. The moment my husband is on the line, he changes his tone and attitude and agrees to more fair prices."

- Jennifer, Entrepreneur

"Once I bought a machine from a local supplier and it immediately malfunctioned. When I confronted the supplier with the defected machine, he refused to replace it. I had to ask for my husband's help and it was only after his interference that the machine was replaced."

- Tamara, agri-food processor in Akkar

Women say that traders and middlemen may manipulate prices and purchase fruits and vegetables from them at lower costs than men. Amer, a farmer, gave an example of tomatoes being sold for 2,000 LBP a kilo in Akkar while going for 36,000 LBP in certain stores in Beirut, indicating manipulation by middlemen. Faten, another farmer, says, "We are always in debt to middlemen, they are thieves. My husband and I are trying to find ways to completely stop working with them." Relevantly, a study on organic agriculture in Lebanon finds that one of the reasons why organic tomatos are less profitable than conventionally farmed ones is because of the presence of intermediaries, who "seem to have higher control over the organic sector in Lebanon" (Abebe, Traboulsi, & Aoun, 2022). The study concludes that organic tomato sales will be much more profitable if farmers sell produce directly to consumers.

Farmers often have to transport their products from their farms to wholesale markets, which some women find challenging. They may not have access to vehicles or are unable to cover fuel costs. Moreover, for women in rural areas, a lot of the roads have bad infrastructure, which makes transportation doubly challenging.

Over the past couple of years, more women have become directly involved in marketing, both in physical and online platforms. Women are selling milk directly to shops and industries for instance. Several women also benefit immensely from cross-cooperative initiatives, as well as food festivals in the country. Others have launched online home businesses for catering and delivery to restaurants and households, as well as opening shops in rural and urban areas directly. Jennifer, who co-owns a business with her husband, says that she has mostly been responsible for the online branding strategy while her husband negotiates with traders. Jennifer says, "I think women are better with social media because we spend more time on it and know what most attracts young people." However, there is still a lot she wants to learn, specifically illustration and how to produce reels for her business. In other interviews, including those with cooperatives, women say that they are advertising most of their work through social media platforms (particularly Instagram) but that they seek more skills when it comes to branding online and in person. The head of a cooperative, Samira, says she relies on her young daughter to help her advertise the cooperative's products. She says, "You know how it is, we [members of the cooperative] are old and don't really know how to build an audience on social media so we have to rely on our children, the younger generation, to do so for us."

Previously women could not access physical markets with ease due to issues of mobility and visibility. Thus, being able to operate and sell products through online platforms presents an opportunity.

3.1.6. Other roles within the sector: animal production, forestry work, beekeeping, eco-tourism, and herb/oil extraction

A small number of Lebanese and Syrian women in the North appear interested in animal production. In Akkar, several women discussed their involvement in smallscale poultry and sheep rearing. However, it is mostly for subsistence farming and not for trade. Based on interviews, it appears very rare for women to herd cows; such work is still mostly male-dominated. On the other hand, women use the milk to produce butter, labneh, yoghurt, and other dairy products. **Dairy production has always been popular for women in both urban and rural areas of the North as a form of income generation.**

Another crucial and often overlooked role that women play is in forest and agricultural land conservation. This is often unpaid and invisible, but some women interviewed say they feel a strong connection to the land and want to be involved in its conservation. Through NGOs, informal community groups, or even individual initiatives, women organise clean-ups and work on committees for natural reserve conservation.

The Northern region has witnessed multiple forest fires over the past couple of years. Lebanon's forest fires usually occur in the autumn, September to November, due to the combination of high temperatures and low humidity caused by strong winds. Any small initiation of heat, whether due to lightning or even a cigarette butt, can lead to a fire. Thus negligence, farming, waste disposal, or arson end up having huge costs on the land. The burning of forests affects women within rural communities significantly. Yet, women are rarely involved in fire management and the mechanisms of fire prevention and mitigation are often dominated by men. However, although forest guards are mostly men, and firefighting is considered "masculine", interviews with firefighters show that more women are becoming involved through community organisations such as Akkar Trail and NGOs such as Lebanese Reforestation Initiative (LRI).

Local communities and NGOs have been occasionally active in awareness campaigns in Akkar, particularly over the past couple of years. This has been in the form of awareness-raising around community prevention; training and induction for local volunteer firefighters in rural areas; and participatory research on wildfire prevention and response.

Beekeeping has also become more common among women in Lebanon over the recent years. Women are selling honey in cooperatives, organic shops, eco-tourism lodges and guesthouses, as well as

by-products such as candlewax and apitherapy. Eco-tourism, as well, has seen a boom especially prior to the crisis. A number of women across the North have either launched or work within eco-touristic enterprises. During holiday seasons, these enterprises attract many tourists, especially from the Lebanese diaspora population, as well families and youth groups. Some of the activities under ecotourism include religious tourism, hiking, snowshoeing, cooperatives, mouneh-making, guesthouse management, heritage work. There has also been an increase in enotourism, i.e., wine tourism, in wineries across Batroun and Jbeil such as IXSIR, Batroun Organic Mountains, Clos du Phoenix, which combines tourism with catering services. An interesting opportunity given the large-scale production of olive oil in the country is oleotourism. Oleotourism can combine olive oil tasting with village tours, hikes through olive orchards, and catering services provided by rural women. According to a recent study, organic operators in Lebanon "have adopted the model from 'farm to fork' and established an end-market on their farms to provide touristic activities such as restaurants with specialty chefs, kids park, kids' activities, culinary activities and special occasions" (Abebe, Traboulsi, & Aoun, 2022).

For some rural community members, there is a strong historical connection to one's village or "land." A number of women interviewees describe the work they do—whether as beekeepers, olive pickers, tour guides, cooperative heads—as spiritual and necessary for maintaining Lebanon's rich agricultural and natural resources heritage. In Akkar, some women possess indigenous knowledge of herbs, seeds, and soil types. They even use different herbs—from 'khebeize', 'akoub', 'dam el ghazel' (blood of the deer), 'korrat', 'hendbeh', spinach, 'moche', 'lsen el thor' or 'balaasoun', 'rshad', 'dardar', 'kors 3ane', 'jorira', rhubarb, and wild thyme—to treat health issues, use in foods, and for sale. This sense of connection gives the work women do within the agriculture sector a strong sense of meaning and purpose. Some interviewees express interest in sharing their knowledge and commitment with students, tourists, neighbours, and other community members.

3.2. Emerging themes in light of the crisis

3.2.1. "NGOisation" of the sector: NGOs a key source of social and financial capital

Women in urban and rural areas appear to benefit from NGOs and INGOs, as well as entrepreneurial bootcamps and labs. Support from NGOs comes in the form of financial provisions, livelihood and skills training, equipment support, and value chain enhancement. Workshops and training sessions focused on gender, agri-food production, and agriculture appear to have increased following the economic crisis, particularly focusing on economic empowerment and sustainable approaches. An increasing number of programmes tackle economic issues through workshops, networking events, festivals, training sessions, and others. Moreover, organisations support farmers and producers with a range of machinery and equipment. Some of the equipment procured for interviewees by NGOs include tractors for ploughing, tilling, and transportation; fruit shredders and dryers; herb crushers; weed pullers; machines for dairy production; stainless steel products needed for developing kitchens, among others.

> "Previously, interventions by NGOs focused on human rights and protection services for women. Today we're noticing that there's been a significant increase in addressing women's economic participation and business development not just in urban areas but also rural ones. This is an encouraging trend."
>
> *- Raed, development practitioner*

Lebanon's agriculture sector today is largely supported through multilateral funding sources, through UN agencies, particularly FAO, WFP, UNDP, and ILO, as well as the World Bank and the European Union, and other country-level donors including USAID, Canada, Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan, among others, through embassy development projects (El-Hajal, 2022). Funding is focalised through international and local NGOs, private social enterprises, relevant ministries

(Agriculture, Environment, or Energy and Water Ministries) and/or municipalities (El-Hajal, 2022)[7]. Though interventions tend to work across Lebanon, there is a significant focus on Bekaa and Akkar (El-Hajal, 2022).

Key informants working either in the funding or implementation of such programs note that gender sensitivity and mainstreaming has become significantly more common over the past decade especially. Some interventions, as well, are directed solely on women cooperatives, women-led SMEs, and women agricultural workers. Moreover, over the past three years, agricultural interventions have started to account for Lebanese women as well, whereas previously the focus was on Syrian refugee women working informally. The support for the agriculture sector comes in different ways. According to interviews with women who have received support, this is either through training sessions (technical and life skills, alternative and more cost-efficient forms of agriculture, gender awareness, business development, etc.); cash for work; provision of input supplies and machinery; and infrastructural support such as solar energy and water reservoirs.

NGOs have become a form of social capital among women in the North, enabling increased access to information, resources, and human capital. In one example, two women who met at a training in Akkar ended up collaborating on soap and candle-wax production. Fieldwork shows that a range of interviewees, i.e., Lebanese and Syrian women from different socioeconomic backgrounds, know about the different NGOs providing support to women, whether cash-for-work, protection services, and microfinance programs. Women take it as a 'responsibility' to look for funding and other openings, with fieldwork indicating that it is mostly women within households who keep their eyes open for such opportunities. This is in parallel with increased coordination between NGOs and the private sector, as well as more targeted campaigning, which facilitates women's awareness and access to funds.

Historically, rural microfinance programs were skewed toward men, but this appears to be changing. Amar, a head of a cooperative, reiterates that micro-finance grants and training she received over the past decade from international organisations were key for the launch and success of the cooperative. "Now, I always push women from my village to attend the training sessions so they can learn the skills I have acquired and potentially acquire funds." Amar went on to establish a centre for training within the municipality in her village. "When we realised how much our village relies on agriculture, I decided to encourage women from our village to become productive members. There was much resistance from our community back then, but now we have gotten to a point where all residents of our village are eager to participate in our workshops, training, and cooperative work."

"Over the past ten years, I have collaborated with at least ten different local and international organisations. They were defining in my process. It all started with one training on sustainability, and then a grant from here, a grant from there. I am now standing on my own two feet and don't need NGOs anymore to get here."

- Nour, head of cooperative

Lebanon has a long and rich history of civil society organising[8]. Ultimately, CSOs are composed of NGOs, charities, unions, international agencies, grassroots campaigns, among others. Some of these organisations focus on providing humanitarian aid and relief work, while others focus on advocacy, communication, political empowerment, among others. The legal ease of forming an NGO—coupled with the country's relatively liberal landscape, a strong and intersectional feminist movement, the cyclical periods of crisis, international investment and funds particularly following the Syrian crisis—are some

8 One of the main challenges is even defining what "civil society organisations" in Lebanon are. They are often described as associations and organisations that oppose sectarian divisions and forms of organising. In more recent years, particularly after the 2015 YouStink movement, civil society in everyday discourse connotes political opposition to the sectarian political system.

of the key factors that have contributed to the expansion of "civil society organisations". Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, existing research has criticised CSOs in Lebanon for being fragmented, elitist, depoliticised, and falling into implementation traps due to their short term and donor-bound cycles. Women interviewed do indeed bring up their personal challenges and experiences with NGOs, unions, cooperatives, among others. **Ultimately, what was expressed in interviews is despite these issues, the proliferation of NGOs in areas long disenfranchised such as Akkar and Tripoli (Masri, 2018) have had positive effects on women's lives and livelihoods.**

3.2.2. Shared and circular economy models: reflecting on women cooperatives and informal women groups

> "It is such a loss to work on an individual level instead of the collective one; we all know the common challenges we have — like lack of ownership and money and land — we have to meet them together."
>
> *- Amal, cooperative member*

A co-operative is defined "as an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise." (Alliance, 2015). Based on the Legislative Decree 17199 from 1964, rural cooperatives in Lebanon are non-profit, autonomous associations that improove socioeconomic conditions of members through joint efforts.[9] Despite the country's weak cooperative legislation and the persistence of inactive cooperatives, cooperatives in Lebanon have overall led to significant gender inclusion, collective profitability through local production and exports, and organisational structures capable of receiving and working with foreign aid (Scolding & Nour, 2021). Cooperatives not only provide women with income and livelihoods, but also skills development and solidarity networks, two critical aspects during Lebanon's crisis. The cooperative structure is critical for women to build networks, access grants and develop partnerships with other cooperatives (as well as NGOs), reduce costs, maintain social connections, access key information and advice from one another, and ultimately have a form of collective bargaining power. Women cooperative members interviewed note that their involvement in cooperatives over the past years has been key. **Data collection indeed indicates a visible rise in cooperative structures, whether registered or unregistered, across the North.** Women-led cooperatives in Lebanon process, market, and distribute jams, molasses, olive oil, honey, rose water, dairy produce, herbs, wheat by-products such as bourghol and kishek and frikeh, among others.

Women-led cooperatives, specifically, are crucial for safe and flexible spaces for women's work in the agriculture sector. Speaking to a range of cooperatives in the North, this study finds that women-led cooperatives are naturally attentive to gender issues, help develop relevant policies for members, and lead to women naturally assuming leadership positions. Amal, a cooperative member, gave an example of how mothers can comfortably breastfeed in cooperative spaces. **Moreover, on-site childcare is sometimes also naturally provided as there are a number of women who may take turns paying attention to toddlers, for instance. Lama, a cooperative head, gave an example of having to present their cooperative's success to donors and organisations, which helped her address her long-held fear of public speaking. Moreover, through cooperatives, women are able to access wider networks and create localised and women-centric channels to communicate necessary information, not just in relation to the agriculture sector, but also social, political, and economic matters.** Another cooperative member, Nidal, adds that cooperatives enable women in rural areas to be better connected to civil society networks, including GBV protection actors, which is crucial when one of their members faces protection issues.

Interviews with cooperative members indicate that when women have a direct say in the activities they want to work on—such as making peanut and almond butter, the specific type of glass they need for jars, how best to package apples, etc.—it helps them reflect more collectively and gives them a shared sense of power. Moreover, cooperatives,

9 For more on the cooperative regulatory framework, see ILO (2018).

especially successful ones, are a form of gradual and continuous training models for women, as to become more successful players in the market, they have to improve and expand on their skills based on shared desires and sentiments.

Women cooperative members interviewed say they have been involved in a range of training sessions provided by organisations and experts including registrations and cooperative laws/policies, business development and sustainable ethical practices, managing their cooperatives during the economic crisis, marketing and online platforms, gender awareness and sensitivity, conflict resolution, among others. Some of the key training or skills cooperatives found beneficial included how to use certain machines, how to be cost-effective in production, better communication skills, and improved packaging and marketing.

Most of the cooperatives interviewed are either women- or men-only. Indeed, interviews with key informants also pinpoint to the fact that there are very few cooperatives in Lebanon that successfully bring together men and women in the agriculture sector. **It is thus interesting to reflect on how cooperatives can consciously and carefully bring together different groups of people – Lebanese and Syrian women, and/or men and women.** While women-only cooperatives are critical for the dynamic reasons highlighted above, consciously organised gender and nationality-mixed models can also help bring out more understanding and knowledge, break down gendered stereotypes, contribute to skills-sharing, and enhance productivity. Women often feel they do not have the knowledge in comparison to men, or the negotiating skills, so advocating for spaces where they do work together is key. Similarly, cooperatives that bring together Syrians and Lebanese may also lead to similar outcomes.

Events that bring together farmers and other agriculture stakeholders from different parts of the country were also strongly recommended by both community members and key informants. Connecting different types of farmers in the North to those across the country leads to knowledge production as well as stronger regional networks that may contribute to increased sales. For instance, one woman farmer from Akkar noted that she had attended a workshop with other cooperatives from Mount Lebanon and was later contacted by one cooperative in Kfardebiane who purchased several boxes of strawberries from her.

> "As women, we have to focus on cooperative work. It is necessary for our autonomy and development as farmers, and it is a keyway for us to break stigmas. If someone sees twelve women all operating a farm and selling its produce, they can't attack it. If they see one woman, she becomes an easy target."
>
> *- Shaima, Head of Cooperative*

As noted in a literature review on gender equality and women's empowerment in co-operatives (Duguid & Weber, 2016), "co-operative enterprises are placed in a unique position to ensure and promote gender equality and women's empowerment and to contribute to the achievement of the goals and targets laid out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." **While this study finds this to be true, it is important to note that cooperatives do not necessarily achieve equality and empowerment simply because they are organised within a cooperative structure.** Indeed, there are several challenges that women cooperatives face. Data collection came across or were told of stagnant women-led cooperatives in Lebanon with undemocratic structures. Moreover, cooperatives may end up reflecting certain power structures or relations within their communities. For instance, Amal, a member of a cooperative, discussed how cooperative members can end up limiting themselves by thinking there are only specific roles they can occupy, i.e. production and processing, instead of a whole other range across the value chain. Amal also says some cooperatives prefer not to expand out of fear that they will be condemned by other members within their society.

Moreover, another challenge is that the process of registering cooperatives is highly bureaucratic and political. For years, research has shown that the cooperative movement in Lebanon is weak, male-dominated, and corrupt (Scolding & Nour, 2021). Amar, the head of a cooperative, says, "Politics plays a huge role in registering cooperatives. I've been

trying to register my cooperative [which has 12 members in it] since 2017. I call the directorate and they tell me what to do; I do it, and then they disappear." This has really affected Amar as some grants or loans are only provided to registered cooperatives. Luckily, she mentions a couple of programmes or organisations that account for a cooperative's history and record instead of how "official" they are.

"If you trace the way agricultural trade happens in Lebanon, it is actually very political and connected to war mafias. This is why they say it is not a woman's world; because men run large scale production through their political connections, while women engage in small-scale production that is outside such bubbles. This is also why it is not in the interest of politicians to influence the agriculture sector; the way it currently operates is in their interest."

- Rima, Development Practitioner

A range of international agencies and local organisations support cooperatives in the country because of their local and women-centric nature (ILO 2018). According to several key informants, there has also been an increase in donor-funded projects that support women-led cooperatives. This has led some interviewees to question whether cooperatives end up becoming donor dependent. Ultimately, a number of women-led cooperatives say they indeed relied on donors to kickstart or obtain certain needed machinery, but that their work is autonomous and constantly expands and shifts depending on local needs.

Data collection indicates that patterns are emerging among Lebanese women, such as community farms, collective rooftop gardening, and mutual aid projects focused on the agriculture sector. Such models are not new per se. Fadia, a farmer from Akkar, says, "We have always relied on each other as farmers, we don't have anyone else supporting us but each other." She adds that farmers tend to share tools and resources with each other, and that there is a relatively strong sense of camaraderie between Lebanese farmers in her village in Akkar. What is new, perhaps, is the involvement of young and more middle-class youth in such land-centred initiatives. One initiative, for instance, has reclaimed agricultural land in Ras Maska and a group of community members grow vegetables there together. A year after, they opened a local restaurant with produce from the land itself. This initiative, as one of its founders describes, is people-focused, with the aim of protecting farmers and relying on the collective instead of monopolistic seed companies. Other initiatives in the North aim to recover agricultural land and establish seed libraries.

"Since the crisis, and after the October 17 uprising, the notion of solidarity in agriculture is growing among certain groups. You see them trying to transfer skills and knowledge and think of ways to elevate their area sustainably."

- Ahmad, Agriculture Expert

3.2.3. Shifting perceptions of agricultural work and reverse migration

Classist and racist perceptions of agricultural work persist. A number of interviewed Lebanese men and women often appear to unfavourably view labour-intensive work as something for "impoverished migrants" or "refugees looking for informal employment." Such perceptions are perpetuated by media portrayals and discriminatory political discourses that depict Syrian refugees as taking over the jobs of Lebanese (Sajadian, 2020). However, even prior to the 2011 refugee crisis, Syrian migrants–both men and women—worked in Lebanon's agriculture sector, and the agriculture sector has long relied on their cheap labour. With the arrival of refugees, however, the demand for food grew, in addition to increased investments in the agriculture sector (Hamade & Turkmani, 2022). Ultimately, in the divisions of roles and responsibilities among women in Lebanon, the notion of agricultural labour has long been tied to the "temporary" status of refugee workers. Thus, while it is not controversial for Lebanese women to, for instance, grow fruits and vegetables in their backyard or work in family-based agriculture, it is

rather rare to come across Lebanese women working among a larger group under a landowner or farmer for daily wage.

> "We work hard but are looked down upon. We are doing the work that Lebanese women don't want to do, and yet we are seen as stealing opportunities from them."
>
> - *Basima, Syrian Agricultural Worker*

Lebanese farmers interviewed say that the influx of Syrian refugees in the country has had negative repercussions on many industries. However, a significant number of interviewees also acknowledge the vital and critical role Syrian women have played in the agriculture sector. Jamila, a Lebanese farmer, says, "Based on my observations, Syrian women have really contributed to the sector. They are hard-working and committed and know a lot about land work." Another head of a cooperative, Shaima, says she has learnt a lot from refugee women's "detailed eye" in mouneh production.

Interviewees also indicate that growing crop diversity in the North of Lebanon can be attributed to the work of Syrian refugee workers. Some of the crops Syrian refugees have planted and, in some cases, introduced include strawberries, olives, vegetables, stone fruits, citruses, nuts, and industrial crops. There are also more greenhouses in Akkar, for example, as well as novel methods of farming.

Moreover, perceptions of agricultural work also appear to be slowly changing among Lebanese communities. On the one hand, more Lebanese women are engaging in family-based agricultural work due to issues of food insecurity. While it appears that women-led production is still on a small-scale level and often for household consumption or neighbourhood-level sales, there are new initiatives and enterprises filling in gaps within the market.

There appears to be an increase in reverse migration in response to Lebanon's economic crisis. Fuel shortages, increasing air and noise pollution, and the Beirut blast have pushed significant numbers of people to move toward less polluted areas. According to Information International, "the number of reverse migrants falls between 55,000 individuals and 77,000" and this number is likely to increase in coming years as cost of living in urban cities hikes (Shibani, 2021). Sima, a Lebanese community activist from Bcharre, says, "Over the past two years, many people, including young adults, have come back to the village. There is a reversion to old ways of living because the modern 'world' is clearly not working." A municipality member from Akkar also notes that many people have been trying to escape the pressures of urban life. "They come here, and you see them asking questions about agriculture, they want to plant and farm. There is a return to villages across Lebanon." A growing number of people are moving to villages not only to seek decreased living costs but also to be closer to natural resources and to seek agricultural self-sustenance. Interviewees say this is an opportunity as it activates small-scale economies and encourages increased activities and investment in historically neglected areas.

3.3. Structural and daily challenges women face

Women across the value chain face interconnected challenges, some of which are related to broader economic and political forces, others more contingent on particular situations. The section on women's roles across the value chain highlights key disincentives for women: high production costs and the more general climate of financial uncertainty; the lack of diverse employment opportunities—especially meaningful ones—for women in rural areas; unfair and gender imbalanced wages; lack of access to land and production inputs; the woes of middlemen; the infamous 'double burden' on women to both manage household affairs and agriculture work; navigating gendered stereotypes and discrimination, as well as the fear of sexual abuse and harassment while on the field; the restrictions on women's mobility, especially in light of the fuel crisis; among others. The study below sectionalises the main challenges that women in the North face, focusing on the economic crisis and its direct effects on the agriculture sector, as well as sociocultural norms and legal barriers women face.

3.3.1. The economic crisis and its effects on the agriculture sector

"I can't tell you how bad the situation is, how much women in my village are suffering. The number of women I know skipping meals for their children, or not taking their medicine to be able to pay for transportation fees for their children, is unbelievable."

- *Shaima, Head of Cooperative*

PRICE FLUCTUATIONS AND ITS EFFECT ON INPUT PROVISIONS

Lebanon's economic crisis gravely affects small-scale farmers. The financial and debt crisis has pushed farmers into cycles of uncertainty and insecurity as prices of inputs have hiked in USD, making a lot of inputs inaccessible. Some of the main raw materials women farmers have struggled to purchase include high quality seeds, greenhouse structures and polyethylene, fertilisers, fuel, irrigation systems, and pesticides. **Women in agri-food processing report that materials needed for production, such as stainless-steel equipment and glass jars, are very expensive and finding local factories that can provide in bulk is challenging.**

Given the fluctuating exchange rate, there is a confusion among farmers and agri-food producers about how to price their products. A key issue that affects farmers is that they purchase inputs in dollars but sell their produce in Lebanese pounds. As such, farmers opt for cheaper input supplies to cut down on costs, which leads to more pesticides and diseases in their yield.

Women interviewees say it is challenging to respond to the constantly fluctuating exchange rate and prices. Samira, a catering business owner, says, "It confuses me more than anything, the question of how to price my meals. And I often feel bad because I know families are struggling. There's no one to really ask about how much a daily platter should cost. We just follow the patterns in the market and look at each other [i.e. others in the business] for some clarity."

"My bank accounts are all frozen so I can't do anything with my money. My employees can't register for their social security. They are still working really hard to provide the best product, but we can't accommodate the price fluctuations: for example, we once worked all night long to finish an order we had. The deal was set at the rate of 20,000LBP. We woke up the next day to find out that the rate had jumped up to almost 25,000LBP."

- *Alia, Agri-food Processor*

INFRASTRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Lebanon has always suffered from very weak infrastructure (Verdeil, 2018) and the economic crisis has exacerbated it further (El Amine, 2022). Limited electricity, unreliable transportation due to fuel shortages, worsening communication signals, and minimal public water provision affect value chain actors across all sectors.

Worsened infrastructure has led to increased costs for women farmers and producers. Tania, a member of a cooperative, notes that improper storage of material has led to an increase in the price of her products, because the price of the unused and spoiled material is carried over to the price of the sold products. Food storage has also taken a huge toll. The head of another cooperative, Amira, says, "We don't store meat anymore because of the electric cuts. Even vegetables can't be stored anymore. This really impacts our pricing since we now buy X amounts of vegetables to make food but end up consuming only half the amount."

The limitations of accessing resources, from fuel and food to water, has also led to increased tensions in some households. For instance, the difficulty in attaining water—which ensures the cleanliness and sanitation of the house and is needed for children's health—has taken a huge psychological and emotional toll on some interviewed women, who often play the role of house-manager. Interviewees report feeling shame and exhaustion at the situation

because they place a lot of responsibility on themselves to oversee the household affairs.

> "Because of gendered stereotypes, women feel that if their house is unclean, then they will be shunned. Also, increase in domestic tensions may occur if women are unable to cook, for instance. [...]. In indirect ways, and in more direct ways, not having access to water and not having control over your sanitation situation, can affect you socially and psychologically as a woman."
>
> - *Damia, gender expert*

Transportation issues have also forced farmers to tighten their radius of sales. Fatima, a farmer in Akkar, says, "Before we used to sell our fruits and vegetables in Tebbaneh. Now it costs too much to sell there so we are simply relying on the nearest market to us." Another farmer says there are key items she needs from farmers in the Bekaa area but it is too costly to have them delivered and so she must settle for available, often lesser quality, products in nearby areas.

ACCESSING FINANCE

Broadly, farmers are facing decreased financing opportunities due to issues of capital control[10] and fear of investment in an insecure climate. While women are receiving grants and funds from a range of non-state actors, these funds appear to mostly be short-term ones. Previously, farmers could use credit to pay for input supply and then pay their suppliers after harvest. Interviewees indicate this, given today's context, is very rare.

Rural women in particular have very restricted access to loans or financial resources. Land tenure is also a huge challenge in the North of Lebanon, especially Akkar, which has a long history of feudalism (Masri, 2016). Women farmers in the North, whether Lebanese or Syrian, often do not own the land which reduces their likelihood of having collateral and accessing loans. Samira, a farmer, says, "Before the crisis, I tried many times to apply for loans, but it was extremely bureaucratic, and I did not have any land or collateral to put up." And today, a large number of community members have lost access to their savings due to the banking crisis. Moreover, to register as a company, individuals, in most cases, need to have a bank account, which has also become increasingly difficult as most banks are restricting opening new bank accounts.

The Kafalat program, through the banking system, was launched over a decade ago to support small and medium sized enterprises with accessing long-term credit at zero interest rates. Obtaining funds from Kafalat required a mortgage or some form of collateral guarantee. This naturally excluded many farmers, especially vulnerable women farmers who often had no personal assets. Fieldwork indicates that the Kafalat programme, and the majority of micro-finance institutes[11], has been inactive but further research is required on the matter. An interviewee who works in a microfinance programme says, "Investing in the agriculture sector is tricky—it sometimes is too challenging. Farmers are subjected to very high risks especially considering geopolitical trends."

However, through certain NGOs, more rural women are able to access small grants and funds that may support them in business development and expansion. A programme manager at an NGO that works on agriculture says, "Donors are proactive about providing funds specifically to women. Not just because women are vulnerable but also because it is more likely for women to invest and, in cases of loans, pay back."

COPING STRATEGIES

Some farmers are planting less because of the crisis. Samir, a farmer in Minyeh, says, "My family used to plant around 80 dunums of land. But now we cannot afford to plant more than 10 dunums because input provision and other services needed for successful agriculture costs too much." Sacks of tomato, wheat, and potatoes went unsold because

10 Although women said there are decreased financing opportunities, they also acknowledged that there are now, perhaps more than ever, NGOs and INGOs investing in women-led enterprises and capacities.

11 Al Majmouaa, an NGO that focuses on women's economic empowerment, is still active.

farmers did not want to sell such large amounts of produce at such low prices. A lot of farmers are also transitioning to cheap crops.

Syrian agricultural workers, despite their cheap labour, are also being laid off. A Lebanese farmer in Akkar, Samira, says she and her husband have had to lay off 8 Syrian agricultural workers. They've retained only two for the most arduous physical tasks. Otherwise, they try to do the physical labour themselves. Another Lebanese farmer, Lamia, is no longer paying her agricultural workers because it has become too costly. Instead, she has offered them a small piece of land to place their settlement for free. Moreover, those who have retained their jobs are paid significantly less in terms of market value. Syrian female agricultural workers in Akkar and Tripoli get paid 30,000 to 40,000 LBP per day for work whereas men get paid between 70,000 to 80,000 LBP per day.

The monthly wages of farmers have also significantly reduced in USD. Lamia, a farmer, gave an example: "In 2018, I used to make around 800,000 to 1,000,000 LBP per month. That was around 600 USD. Now I make around 2,400,000 LBP per month. That's nothing, it's around 80 USD[12]."

INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS AND WEAKENED EXTENSION SERVICES

"The olive season was also at risk of being lost. A pesticide, usually offered by the MoA, was suddenly no longer available in the market. Some of us, those with access to meagre finances, could pay for imported pesticides from private suppliers. However, I know at least four farmers who couldn't and thus lost their produce for the year."

- *Shaima, head of cooperative*

The Ministry of Agriculture, like most other ministries, is facing a lot of external and internal challenges due to the crisis. Although the MoA, according to interviews, has always had weak extension services, there were services it provided on a yearly basis—such as provision of fertilisers and pesticides, as well as check-ups. Interviews indicate that even these services have decreased. To fill this gap, several NGOs and international agencies, as well as politically affiliated groups, appear to be providing farmers with extension services. Private input suppliers continue to dominate, and interviews say they don't have clear prices and do not often follow proper protocol or quality standards. Women, in general, prefer to liaise with an input supplier they trust. Nisrine, a beekeeper, notes that the MoA should coordinate more closely with farmers. She, alongside other beekeepers in the North, had requested imported treatment to cure the oak and cedar trees that bees fed on. The MoA opted for a less costly solution; however, the pesticides killed the bees.

NGOS: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Although NGOs have played such a critical role for women farmers, data collection conveys dissatisfaction among women participants with regards to some organisations. Participants, for instance, expressed dissatisfaction with the application process for funds, noting they can be complicated, and grants may take a while to arrive. Language and comprehension barriers to applications can be a challenge for women, both literate and illiterate ones, especially in cases where applications are in English. There is a need for more training on how to apply for grants, especially for women who may be illiterate or not have easy access to smartphones and laptops.

"I don't know how to apply for grants. I know some other women in the nearby village are getting assistance left and right, and I feel left out. There should be a centre we can simply walk to or a number we can call to understand what opportunities are out there for us."

- *Fadia, farmer in Akkar*

12 This number is based on the exchange rate at the time of the interview but has changed at the time of writing to 70 USD. This reflects the continuously changing nature of wages.

One woman said she received a grant for a specific machine for her dairy business from an international agency. She received the machine two years later, amid the country's economic crisis, whereby the machine had become useless because there were electric shortages. "I had to buy another machine that could work on battery power, since the machine they had procured for me needed a lot of electricity. Because of their delay, the machine went to waste." Another interviewee said she had received tools and materials from an international organisation, mostly knives and sickles, although that was not what she had requested. She added that the quality of the tools, as well, was quite bad and she never ended up using them.

There were also some interviewees who said even in NGOs, there are networks of corruption tied to social capital. "Some farmers receive grants or equipment because of who they know, and not necessarily because they are eligible." Participants also questioned the integrity in the selection process for the beneficiaries, adding that some organisations appear to operate on a 'wasta', i.e., social connections.

Donors and NGOs are often unable to support unregistered businesses and cooperatives, of which there are a growing number. Some mutual aid groups for instance were forced to register as an NGO, which goes against their ethos and purpose, to access funds. Within the current context, businesses and emerging cooperatives are more vulnerable than larger enterprises yet appear to be less supported.

3.3.2 Sociocultural norms and patterns of power and decision-making

Agriculture in Lebanon is ultimately impacted by sociocultural norms and power dynamics contingent on family structures, location, interpersonal relations, education levels, and access to knowledge or information. Such complex intersections naturally affect women's ability to make decisions and be involved within the agriculture sector. Indeed, women in agriculture and agri-food production continue to face gendered stereotypes and challenges from unpaid care work and restrictions on mobility to gender-based violence while working on the field and unequal wage distribution between men and women.

Women interviewed say their demands are sometimes not taken seriously—whether by male farmers, government bodies, or even international organisations. This is linked to patriarchal and normative gender relations that continue to pit knowledge and power in the hands of men. Despites decades of women's involvement and indigenous knowledge on agriculture and food-related issues, agriculture continues to be broadly perceived as a male-dominated sector. However, as this paper has thus far shown, this is slowly changing in Lebanon. The more women are economically and socially involved – and recognised – in the agriculture sector, the more power they have. For instance, members of a cooperative in a small and conservative village in Akkar say that when they first started work, they were often demeaned and mocked. Today, municipal authorities, male farmers, and young entrepreneurs come to them for information on how to store and package food without having to rely on electricity; how to cultivate certain types of fruits and vegetables; and how to process nuts into butters. Women's continued and sustained involvement in different segments of the value chains – as well as the broader patterns of feminist grassroots movements in the country – are slowly shifting gendered power dynamics and making women's historical presence in the agriculture sector more pronounced. There is still a long way to go; the sections below explore in closer detail some of the gendered challenges.

WAGE INEQUALITY, DOMESTIC PRESSURES, AND THE DOUBLE BURDEN

Lebanon continues to rank very low with regards to wage equality and gender. According to the World Economic Forum (2020, Lebanon is situated at 14 out of 19 in the Middle East and North Africa, and 145 out of 153 on a global level in terms of wage inequality between men and women.

Although Lebanon's labour law notes that there should be equal pay between men and women for the same job, women in both formal and informal positions in the sector suffer from wage inequality. Studies indeed indicate that women in Lebanon are paid 27% less than men for the same position and are more likely to not receive sick leave (Hammoud, 2014). One study notes that "common factors for both genders [in Lebanon], including years of experience, age, educational level and position, generally

cannot be attributes to explain this significant wage gap; it may imply that the said gap is due to culture, traditions and weak governmental policies" (Hejase & Hejase, 2015). Another study which focuses on the Lebanese working population in the greater Beirut area finds that "female workers earn 16% – 19%, on average, less than their male counterparts taken into account the human and social capital" (Harb & Rouhana, 2020).

Data collection shows that female agricultural workers in Lebanon are paid less than male agricultural workers in Lebanon, often times for the same job. As wages continue to fluctuate due to the country's inflation and exchange rate, Syrian women agricultural workers in the North of Lebanon are sometimes paid half the amount (between 30,000 Lebanese Pounds to 50,000 Lebanese Pounds), if not less, than Syrian men agricultural workers (who are paid between 60,000 Lebanese Pounds to 100,000 Lebanese Pounds). **Interviewees indicate that the crisis may have even exacerbated wage inequality among Syrian men and women as the hourly wage of men appears to increase more quickly than women's with the continuous plummeting of Lebanese Pounds.** Salim, a development expert, gave an example: "In one farm in Akkar, the wages for men were increased by 20,000 Lebanese Pounds per hour when the dollar reached 35,000 Lebanese Pounds. However, the same has not yet happened for Syrian women."

When interviewees, including agricultural workers and women themselves, were asked why this wage difference exists, multiple reasons were given. Community members, including women and men, say that "women work less"; "women's crop production or harvesting is less efficient"; or "women do less physically arduous jobs" in the agriculture sector. However, when interviewees were probed on why women are less productive or engaged then men, they cited that it was because of the double burden: women having to manage work alongside their family responsibilities and domestic pressures. **That is, because women have other responsibilities, they cannot invest as much as men in their work, and are consequently paid less.**

Women may not be encouraged to work because of these domestic pressures. Moreover, when they do work, they are not supported financially and/or emotionally as there are gaps in child-care support. As aforementioned, although the country's labour law has witnessed improvements in the past decades, there is still no paternal leave and maternal leave remains inadequate. Some interviewees also note that women are often the most active in the labour market when they are young but as they enter their thirties, this changes because they are likely to have children. Data collection indicates that some women may feel pressured to exit the labour force or seek part-time, flexible employment in order to manage household affairs especially when their children are young. Women themselves may also settle for less wages as a compromise for working near their homes, or for shorter hours, in order to more easily tend to household affairs. Moreover, support, especially for women in urban areas living far from family members, is an impediment. Interviewees also cited costly and in some rural areas absent day care facilities. Exiting or seeking part-time employment ultimately affects women's wages in the long run as they may be deemed as less experienced or may have difficulty re-entering the labour market.

For some women, motherhood is crucial and should not be viewed as something equal to their careers. For other women, such perceptions only hinder women's progress and during interviews and focus groups, they questioned how to create an environment conducive for women to make choices that work best for them—including prioritising their career.

Other critical reasons included women having less information about markets, limited bargaining power, and reduced social and political capital than men, which might also make them less efficient and productive. Interviews with agri-food producers and other shop owners also indicates that it is likely for men to make more profit because they have larger businesses, more access to finance, and stronger social networks and political connections. In that sense, existing power dynamics and structures prioritise male-led businesses over female-led ones. However, during field work, we came across some women-owned businesses, such as an online catering model and another organic farm, who estimate making more profit than other male-owned businesses in their industry. Their reasons for being as competitive, if not more, than male colleagues were linked to them having more efficient production mechanisms, strong reputations, high

education levels, and fair prices. However, one of the interviewees, Hanine, interestingly adds that her business succeeded once her children entered university and left the house, as it gave her more time to invest in her business. While their reasons could not be evidenced, or further investigated, these two examples perhaps indicate that given the right environment, women businesses can indeed thrive.

Importantly, however, the economic crisis has increased domestic and household pressures for women. Historically, women have had to shoulder care labour within homes including cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, among others. The crisis, which has had huge effects on household members' psychological and physical well-being, has affected women even more.

"During contexts of crisis, there is a sudden hike of what people call "feminine" care. Women have to fetch water; they have to care for children who are suddenly at home because of roadblocks or COVID-19. They have to find medical alternatives for their sick husbands."

- *Damia, gender expert*

STRUCTURAL AND LEGAL IMPEDIMENTS

Sectarianism is entrenched in the country's financial and economic systems (Traboulsi, 2007), which has historically restricted women's meaningful participation in the labour market and exacerbated structural inequalities among vulnerable groups. Sectarian power sharing creates and sustains patronage networks often controlled by and for the male-dominated political elite (Salloukh, 2015; Geha, 2018; Mikdashi, 2022). As previously noted, the agriculture sector is highly politicised (Hamade, 2020) and women interviewees reiterate that a key impediment to their expansion is the lack of political connections. Moreover, despite the prohibition of gender discrimination as per the country's labour law, interviews indicate that there continues to be active cases of discrimination based on sect, age, and gender.

The country's sectarian system is also reflected in its laws. Relevant to this study are personal status laws, whereby familial and gendered issues—including marriage, divorce, and custody—are under the mandate of religious authorities. Fifteen personal status laws overlook and control critical legal and social issues as opposed to one unified code. Although Lebanon's 1959 Civil Law of Inheritance stipulates equal rights to inheritance among men and women, some of the personal status laws, such as those following the Hanafi school of thought, assert that men receive twice the inheritance of women.

A Human Rights Watch report finds that there "a clear pattern of women from all sects being treated worse than men when it comes to accessing divorce and primary care for their children. [...] Across all confessions, women faced legal and other obstacles when terminating unhappy or abusive marriages; limitations on their pecuniary rights; and the risk of losing their children if they remarry or when the so-called maternal custody period (determined by the child's age) ends" (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Land and property are often registered under the name of men also as a way of maintaining wealth because Lebanese women cannot pass on their nationality as per Decree #15 of the nationality law. Thus, personal status laws and the nationality law directly hinder women's economic participation because they affect their access to land and make it more challenging to start businesses due to hiking rent prices.

Indeed, data collection illustrates that women farmers in the North rarely own the land they work on, which affects their control and ownership of productive resources. Interviews confirm that men are significantly more likely to own land and thus have more control over patterns of production and distribution. In cases where women do own land, there is more room for decision-making among women. Fatima, a farmer, says, "I am lucky to have inherited this land. It makes me feel like when my husband and I are planning what to plant, I have an equal—if not more—say than him because it is my land and not his."

These legal issues naturally affect women's ability to own, control, inherit, and take decisions about natural resources and land. Such gender gaps in land and resource ownership perpetuate rural poverty rates among women and make it more difficult for women farmers to seek opportunities and invest

in their work. This also affects women's ability to take out loans. Indeed, a study by the International Finance Corporation (2016) finds that women in Lebanon receive 3% of bank loans although they own around 30% of small and micro businesses. This is because women lack the collateral, i.e., land or property, needed for loans. Other studies also show that loan providers tend to have less trust in women-owned businesses due to gendered biases (USAID, 2019),

Moreover, the discriminatory precedents within the personal status laws – such as its rigid custody and divorce laws – might direly affect women's mental health, time management, and economic situation. This has implicit effects on their economic empowerment and ability to seek meaningful financial opportunities.

The national law ensures that men and women both have the same rights to ownership, banking facilities, and loans. However, this is impeded by the fact that many women, particularly those in rural areas, have to face sociocultural barriers to access credit or loans. Additionally, although women have the right to own and manage properties, women's ownership over financial assets is often impacted by male household members (UN Women, 2016; FTL, 2022).

Syrian refugees' lack of legal status, more particularly, affect their economic opportunities and ability to expand within the agriculture sector. The majority of refugees in Lebanon today lack legal residency permits and are restricted heavily by their ability to move across the country (Baroud, 2021; VASyR, 2021). The rate of legal residency, moreover, is higher among men than women (VASyR, 2021). A series of adhoc regulations and legal provision affect refugees' stay and livelihoods within the country. As per a regulatory framework enforced in 2015 by the General Security Office, Syrian refugees registered in the UNHCR must pledge to only work in agriculture, construction, and cleaning. However, if refugees want to start a business, even if in the agriculture sector, they have to be registered under a costly and bureaucratic sponsorship agreement. Refugees often do not seek this sponsorship agreement as it requires them to have both resident and work permits.

INFORMALITY, EXPLOITATION, AND GBV ON THE FIELD

Lebanon's agriculture sector, like many other developing countries, is highly informal. **It is challenging in and of itself to define who or what a farmer in Lebanon is, as farmers are not attached to a specific legal status.** Farmers are not recognised under the labour law. Additionally, the Lebanese law explicitly excludes agricultural workers, as per Article 7. **Meanwhile farmers do not have insurance that protects them from any accidents or natural disasters. This makes it significantly harder for agricultural workers to seek rights or protection in cases of accidents or exploitation.**

The sector has long suffered from structural neglect and to cope with its main needs, it has relied on cheap labour by vulnerable communities in the country. **Majority of women in agriculture are informal part-timers and thus do not receive protection from the country's labour laws.** The National Social Security Fund—which provides indemnity, insurances, maternity support, and education services—does not cover the majority of agricultural employees because they are not permanent.

Capturing the precise statistics of abuse in agriculture fields in Lebanon remains challenging due to cultural stigmas, under-reporting, and haphazard or uncoordinated data collection. However, a range of studies do indicate the prevalence of GBV among women and girls in Lebanon (Plan International, 2020; UNFA, 2021). While a range of actors, particularly connected to agencies and NGOs, are working on protection concerns... there remain gaps.

A highly worrisome finding is the increase of harassment in the field and workspace. This is particularly the case for refugees in Lebanon who have very little access to legal resources and often work in highly exploitative situations that might be difficult to escape their employment. According to several NGO staff interviewed, more women are facing verbal, sexual, and physical harassment while working on the field. The perpetrators are landlords and shaweeshes mostly. Specifically, the economic crisis and the country's cyclical insecurity leads if not to an increase of GBV then at the very least the normalisation of it. Women in the agriculture sector say that with the increased stresses of everyday in Lebanon, vulnerabilities are being rapidly exacerbated: lack of fair wages, total absence

of insurance, increase in physical violence, among others. Moreover, as a coping strategy, families, especially those in rural areas, are marrying off their daughters to reduce financial responsibilities.

An interviewed case worker says, "We've been receiving a lot of reports on child marriage, child abuse, and gender-based violence. [...]. On the one hand, it is good that these cases are being reported; on the other hand, it is terrifying the extent to which they are becoming normalised." An NGO field officer, Jamal, gave an example of two young girls being kicked off a truck by a landowner. They suffered bruises and PTSD because of the event but have continued to work in agriculture because they have no other source of income.

As noted, Lebanon's labour law does not include informal workers, which leaves many vulnerable women in informal sectors unsupported. Moreover, key ministries such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, do not have the capacity to deal with GBV cases and the country's legal and political infrastructure is weak. Consequently, NGOs and civil society organisations—such as Himaya, ABAAD, KAFA, LECORVAW, UN Women, UNFPA, the Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, Plan International, CARE International, among others—have been taking on a significant percentage of protection cases in the country. Key networks, supported and coordinated by UN agencies in tandem with local and international organisations – including the inter-agency SGBV Task Force, which provides critical SGBV services – fills in the main gaps. The Gender Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) also collects and analyses relevant GBV data on a quarterly basis. Meanwhile, the Lebanon Protection from Sexual Abuse (PSEA) Network coordinates and oversees protection and abuse issues under the Resident Coordinator and a Humanitarian Country Team (for more, see ABAAD's 2020 GBV organisations mapping).

In 2020, a crucial anti-sexual harassment law (No.25) was officially passed. The law came after years of grassroots action and signifies a huge win for the country as it acknowledges power dynamics, survivors' right for compensation, the different punishments depending on the crime committed, and the positionality and privilege of the perpetrator. However, it still contains gaps, as it only addresses harassment as a crime without focusing on prevention measures and needed structural reforms of the labour law (HRW, 2021). Despite the prevalence of GBV organisations, interviews indicate that they are overstretched and there are still gaps in terms of coordination and referral systems. Thus, it is key for women to be supported through improved referral systems, developing local gender focal points, and enhancing protection mechanisms. Moreover, there are no GBV mechanisms that exist specifically for farmers and agricultural workers. Given the large number of women who work informally within the agricultural sector, and with no legal protection, there is a strong need for specialised services and reporting mechanisms for women within the agriculture sector.

Many interviewees reiterate that nation-wide labour regulations should be put in place to protect field workers although key informants say this is highly unlikely during this period and instead local means of protection and reporting—supported by NGOs—is the most feasible solution for now.

STRIPPING WOMEN OF THEIR AGENCY

"The problem is that women's vulnerability has meant that intervening or supporting actors end up viewing them as a 'humanitarian' project that they want to save, as opposed to actors with their own preferences and expectations."

- Racha, female entrepreneur

Reports, studies, and conversations on the field point to the stubborn persistence of sociocultural norms that restrict women from fully participating in the agriculture sector. Across the North, fieldwork indicates that some villages, particularly in Akkar, are highly conservative and perceive women's role as simply that of a housewife[13].

13 It is important to note that more villages are becoming open to the idea of women having autonomy and exposure to the market.

Moreover, certain positions have historically been male-dominated and deemed as inappropriate for women—this includes negotiations with traders, driving tractors, delivering food, cattle-rearing, fishing, etc. Such perceptions have long-running psychological implications, which cause women to become self-conscious and uncomfortable about participating in the labour market.

The persistence of patriarchal sociocultural norms is interlinked with the section above on structural and legal impediments. For instance, a head of a cooperative says that women in agriculture have faced a lot of backlashes from local and religious authorities.

"We don't have a social security system for agricultural workers in Lebanon. We, in partnership with other cooperatives and feminist groups in Akkar, pitched the idea to establish a social security system for women to the authorities back in 2017-18. Little did we know that the religious leaders of Akkar were going to oppose this law and not allow the deputies to present it to the parliament. This is when we realised that local religious leaders in Akkar don't want us to progress nor have laws to protect us. Gender equality goes against their agenda."

- *Nawal, Head of Cooperative*

13 It is important to note that more villages are becoming open to the idea of women having autonomy and exposure to the market.

Sirene, Tripoli, 24.5.2022
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

4 CONCLUSION

Reflecting on Opportunities, Assets, and Key Support Needed

In the North of Lebanon, women have long led on key agricultural activities—from planting and weeding, to gathering crops and processing. They remain actively engaged in multiple forms of vegetable and fruit farming, including olive tree harvesting. They also manage greenhouse production. However, as studies have shown time and again, their roles are mostly concentrated in earlier segments of the value chain. This is due to a range of different sociocultural, economic, legal, and structural-political reasons.

Personal status laws remain an impediment to women, creating cyclical challenges related to marriage, family, custody of children, and inheritance. This often comes in the way of their work both through more explicit ways (land ownership), and more implicit ways (emotional and mental). Moreover, women—particularly agricultural workers—share that the high informality of the agriculture sector has led to cycles of exploitation among them, including protection concerns, low wages, lack of payment on time, and the absence of any form of insurance. This points to the need for comprehensive and clear guidelines for GBV reporting hotlines for women agricultural workers, both Lebanese and Syrian.

Women are also often absent in marketing and distribution segments within the value chain. As such, a lot of their work in the agriculture sector is small-scale and relegated to the production of staple crops. This is in tandem with unpaid care labour, which a lot of women say consumes half—if not the majority—of their day.

However, findings from the field show that women are becoming increasingly more involved in the agriculture sector. Despite having to navigate a series of structural and daily obstacles, women say they are interested in engaging across all the value chain and believe that they can, especially when combining their forces together. This is made relatively easier due to the changing gender roles—as well as decreasing conservatism—within the crisis, whereby households across Lebanon are reflecting on ways to increase their income-generating activities.

Despite often not owning land or having access to capital, they say they have certain assets that they can utilise being naturally detail-oriented; having an intimate understanding of food and knowledge of traditional methods of preserving and drying; stronger social networks within their areas; and maintaining a spiritual connection to land work and preservation.

Women interviewed are highly enthusiastic about attending training sessions, applying to grants, starting cooperatives, and finding solutions to the current crisis. Women in particular appear to be enthusiastic about finding ways to fill the gap within the market. Racha, an entrepreneur, says, "Five years ago, the main problem farmers faced was finding ways to compete with cheap imported products. This has radically changed now because imported products are the more expensive ones. [...]. Building on this fact is key." Women are indeed producing condiments, such as ketchup and mayonnaise and non-dairy milk and artisanal chocolate, which were once wholly dominated by imports.

Interviewed women express interest in growing their businesses; learning new skills, particularly technologically innovative ones; having access to more capital; building their social capital through expansive cross-country networks; formalising their enterprises or, at least, having access to comprehensive information and practices to prevent constant fluctuations. However one of the main challenges they face are the significant costs of production amid the country's inflation. Participants from the agri-food industry particularly suggested imposing higher taxes on imported products and subsidising essential raw materials used in the agricultural and agri-food industries. Moreover, quality control regulations are put in place but not properly applied within the industry. This has led some participants in the agri-food industry to pay a premium to use imported products in their operation since the quality of local material is not to be trusted. Women interviewed also report that a key obstacle is attaining certification and they require more professional training on both packaging and distribution.

Women interviewed during data collection define and relate to "empowerment" as their ability to make choices and decide on key issues pertaining both to their personal lives and engagement in the agriculture sector[14]. This includes having control over productive resources (from lands and seeds, to necessary products) contributing to nation-wide policies and regulations, managing their

time, deciding which socio-cultural norms serve them best at a specific point in time, among others. Moreover, many women connected their sense of agency and empowerment to a shared sense of empowerment. As Shaima, head of a cooperative, notes, **"I can't consider myself successful if other women from my village lag behind. We have to all do it together."**

The presence of international organisations and grassroots community networks has created spaces for women to both explore and expand their social networks, skills, and businesses. Women interviewed particularly express that they want to expand their marketing skills and understand how to broach wholesalers and distributors not just within the North but across the country as well. Supporting them with marketing means connecting them to key market players (transportation providers, wholesale markets, traders, etc.) but also working with them on developing negotiation and communication skills. Women also require support with project management and branding skills, as well as knowledge on how to utilise social media platforms for sales. This is a particular need for women from an older generation who may be less tech-savvy. Women working in cooperatives also say that they seek more linkages with other cooperatives in the country, as well as restaurants, eco-tourism operators, schools, and other institutions they can benefit from. Certainly, connecting women in rural areas to national, as well as international, platforms and websites for the sale of organic and artisanal produce is a key opportunity.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, many businesses have chosen online tools to market their products and delivery services to avoid opening their stores. Online services have proven to be efficient and help decrease the cost of the final product especially that they don't require a physical space for display.

Additionally, women say they don't want to receive training sessions simply on awareness raising or life-skills development, but that they want to focus on income-generation and more sustainable forms of livelihood. The crisis has pushed women to want to become financially stable. As such, supporting women with developing proposals and know-how on grant applications to calls by private sector initiatives and/or NGOs is key. More women are interested in technological innovations, and we have indeed come across women in the private sector making strides with vertical farming, organic composting, agri startups, wastewater management, soil productivity, and e-commerce platforms and applications that support local farmers.

Gender-sensitive work in the agriculture sector demands attentiveness to underlying and oftentimes indiscernible gender norms. Beyond improving women's technical skills in the sector, interventions that seek to work with women towards their meaningful participation in the labour market require an extensive understanding of the social, economic, and political landscapes. Hearing and engaging with a multitude of women, it becomes clear that a gendered analysis of women in agriculture should engage with women's socioeconomic living situation, as well as overall economic trends. A gendered analysis also illustrates that pathways of change for women are contextual and ultimately even the definition of empowerment in and of itself varies widely.

14 The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) is a tool that aims to measure the empowerment and inclusion of women in the agriculture sector. The WEAI measures women's roles, ability to make decisions, control over income and finances, time usage, and leadership within the community. It also measures women's empowerment in comparison to that of male members in their household itself.

May, Tripoli, 25.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The sections below target a key set of recommendations that emerged based on the study. They are directed towards relevant international organisations and agencies, as well as policy makers and local authorities.

5.1. Acknowledging the role of women as agents of change in the agriculture and agri-food sectors

• First and foremost, it is critical that women within the agriculture sector are involved as key agents of change instead of a vulnerable population in need of humanitarian support. Working alongside women and community members to design, implement, and monitor interventions is key. It is necessary that women from the community itself are involved in baseline activities in order for them to have a specific say on the specific vision and goals they have. This also enables the identification and articulation of context-specific gender objectives by women within the communities themselves.

• It is important to involve participants on a neighbourhood-level as this helps induce community-level change while deconstructing negative perceptions and stereotypes of women within the community. When and where possible, activities that might bring together men and women within the community is key, as it could also enable them to explore challenging issues and subjects related to their roles and responsibilities both within the community and the sector as a whole.

5.2. Recognising and working within the limitations of the country's economic crisis and local currency devaluation

This study illustrates the grave effects of the economic crisis – including price fluctuations, continuous currency devaluation, import crisis, and fuel and water shortages – on women farmers, producers, and agricultural workers. It is necessary for interventions to find ways to both alleviate the effects of the crisis and work within the country's current economic status quo. This include, without being limited to:

• Advocating for multinational agreements that facilitate the provision of inputs in large quantities but lower costs

• Supporting women's access to water through innovative water conservation techniques that are also sensitive to climate change , like rainwater collection

• Supporting women with solar, wind, and bio energy.

• Expanding women's local production in dairy, meat, condiments, and other foodstuffs to help substitute overly priced import produce. This should be done in coordination with other relevant actors to ensure product diversification.

• Supporting women with accessing dollarised certification and helping them attain quality control standards for export markets.

5.3. Enhancing coordination networks between institutional actors

• Fieldwork indicates growing investment and focus by institutional actors, particularly non-state ones, within the agriculture sector and agri-food sectors. A range of NGOs, international agencies, and mutual aid groups appear to be working on rural development and sustainable agriculture practices. Thus, it is recommended that there be improved and joint coordination plans between international agencies, including UNIDO and FAO and WFP and UN Women, with civil society networks and relevant state bodies (MoA, MoI, and the NCLW).

• UN Women has an important role to play in supporting relevant ministries with gender-specific actions that address women's needs and empowerment. This is through upgraded gender analyses, gender conscious training and programmes, and advocating for better gender policies and regulations.

5.4. Liaising with gender focal points and the Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) task force

• The past five years have witnessed an increase in gender focal points within ministries and civil society organisations. It is key that gender focal points in relevant ministries are connected to both civil society networks and the SGBV task force particularly for reporting cases of harassment on the field and ensuring effective response mechanisms for GBV survivors.

• It is also recommended that ministries and organisations work together for more effective sex-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive development policies in both urban and rural areas.

5.5. Supporting women in the development and sustenance of shared economy models

• The crisis has pushed women to utilise community-based models, such as mutual aid networks and cooperatives (both registered and unregistered). More women are seeking to share resources, work collectively, and enhance their bargaining power. Supporting women with sustaining and expanding informal communal networks through financial and technical assistance is key.

• However, it is crucial that support is flexible and contingent on their needs and expectations without enforcing hierarchies or added bureaucracy as one of the benefits of such models is the strong sense of agency, autonomy, and decentralisation it offers.

5.6. Recognising and supporting women's role in agri-food processing

Women are highly engaged and interested in agri-food processing. Over the past couple of years, they have both launched and expanded businesses across the country that are filling in the gaps of the country's import crisis. Supporting them with machinery, networking opportunities, grants, and market linkages is key. Moreover, supporting them with accessing raw materials needed for production, such as glass and aluminium, is key. This can be through creating linkages between women processors and large-scale factories and industries, or whole-sale traders. This might also help reduce transportation costs and mobility challenges.

5.7. Prioritising rural women's wage equality and access to finance and other services

• Historically, rural women are disenfranchised and neglected from nation-wide strategies and implementation. Field work shows the presence of NGO and other civil society networks has been crucial for their economic empowerment.

• Advocating for the standardisation of wages for men and women working in the same position is necessary.

• Moreover, the agriculture sector is capable of absorbing large numbers of workers and initiatives due to the crisis, increase in demand, and the many gaps within the market. Expanding support targeted directly toward rural women's social and financial capital is critical, while also ensuring they have better access to inputs and extension services.

• It is also recommended for donors to focus on flexible fundings for NGOs and community groups as this contributes to women making more active decisions about how they want to use financial resources and what their priorities are.

• It is important to focus on training women entrepreneurs to

  o Write proposals for NGOs, and to become familiar with applying and applications

  o Focus on financial literacy so that they can approach investors, business angels and other actors in the social enterprise ecosystem. They need to present to investors financials including balance sheet, income statement, and basic forecasts.

  o A more developed course in the field of finance would be on seed-funding, crowd-funding, and other alternative ways to finance given the situation in Lebanon.

5.8. Building cross-regional networks between women associations and cooperatives

• There is a strong need for building linkages between women cooperatives, farmer groups, and associations both across the country and within the MENA region. The work that women agri-food processors in the Bekaa do might provide lessons for women in Akkar, and vice versa.

• Similarly, field work shows that there is an interest and curiosity in creating partnerships on a regional basis between farmers and agri-food processors across the Mediterranean region due to shared climate and changing experiences. This can help generate knowledge production as well as contribute to increased market linkages and business opportunities.

5.9. Creating urban-rural linkages between women

Fieldwork indicates a growing interest in and need for linkages between a range of different stakeholders across the value chain including rural workers, food festivals, organic farms, agri-food processing, industries and factories, cooperatives, shops, and restaurants. However, ensuring that such urban-rural exchanges happen in a fair and equitable manner is key as often-times middlemen and traders may take advantage of rural workers and farmers.

5.10. Valorising the role of women in organic farming

• Field work indicates a growing interest in organic methods of farming. Supporting women through technical know-how, business development linkages, and certification facilitation is key.

• It is also an opportunity to link women organic farmers with cooperatives, industries, shops, and restaurants to capitalise on the growing trend of healthy consumptions.

5.11. Continuing to advocate for needed legal reforms that improve gender equality in the country

• Legal and policy-related obstacles continue to limit women's economic empowerment in the agriculture sector. Advocating for improving labour laws, enhancing the domestic violence law, and establishing a unified civil code are key.

• It is important to work toward laws that ensure better working conditions and protection of both farmers and agricultural workers. Moreover, advocating for the enhancement of the current cooperative law is needed with a focus on better incentives for cooperatives.

•Finally, better understanding and campaigning against child labour in the agriculture sector is key. Working with women parliamentarians and feminist lobbyists to achieve such changes is also recommended.

5.12. Improve protection services for agricultural workers, particularly Syrian refugees

There has been a spike in protection concerns for agricultural workers across the country. Enhancing referral systems and SGBV protection for workers, particularly for Syrian refugees with very little to no access to legal support, is crucial. This should also be in tandem with advocating for better working conditions for refugees, including increased social protection, insurance schemes, and fair pay.

5.13. Advocate for open-access data and relevant qualitative and quantitative gender analysis of the agriculture sector

•There are a number of critical gender analyses of the agriculture sector conducted in Lebanon. However, these studies are not well-coordinated and may overlap.

• It is recommended that academic studies and reports by international organisations relevant to gender issues within the agriculture sector are unified and shared with key stakeholders.

•Moreover, finding ways to make such research and studies more accessible to farmers, cooperatives, and agricultural workers is key as they are often not involved in the research dissemination process. This can be through translating key research into Arabic, making infographs and policy briefs of the data, and hosting conferences and events to share findings. It can also include mass communication messages that target individuals with minimal access to information through tailored communication campaigns.

5.14. Provide tailored and diverse training for different women working across the value chain

•Training sessions should be accessible for women in rural areas and should account for the various needs. Interviews show that some women may find training sessions redundant. Thus, there should be diverse approaches and methods that account for women with different levels of education, leadership capacities, locations, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

•Providing training sessions that support women with affordable, innovative, and accessible technology and technical skills to address gaps in the agriculture sector is key. This includes facilitating access to finance and grants in agricultural technology that works within the country's limited infrastructure.

• Moreover, as online platforms and remote businesses have proven to be effective for women in the agriculture sector, enhancing their knowledge on e-commerce and online marketing and branding is key.

• There is also a strong need for helping women become better at negotiating prices, marketing products, and linking with traders and buyers. Thus, life-skills, as well as managerial and business development support is needed. Training may be provided by international organisations in tandem with private sector initiatives, vocational schools and universities, and other relevant knowledge providers.

5.15. Supporting women with childcare support for children under five years of age

When and where possible, hiring organisations or cooperatives should provide childcare support for women with young children. Moreover, linking women to available childcare facilities in the area, and supporting them financially with costs, can also help them invest more time into work and/or training sessions.

5.16. Mainstreaming climate change considerations

Data collection indicates growing concern about climate change among farmers and other relevant stakeholders. The past decade has witnessed increased wildfires, decreased rainfall and snow, intensifying heat, and sea acidification which has reduced farmers' crop yields and affected the agriculture sector across the country. Interventions in the agriculture sector should be aligned with relevant climate change conventions, local strategies, and international agreements. Moreover, interventions should be carefully attuned to the ways gender intersects with climate change and security issues in the country.

Sandra, Tripoli, 25.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

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