

INVISIBLE HANDS: THE STRUGGLES OF FEMALE AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN MOROCCO

Hind Ftouhi & Lisa Bossenbroek

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THE AUTHORS

Ftouhi Hind

Dr. Hind Ftouhi is an agronomist and rural sociologist. She is currently a lecturer-researcher at the Institut National d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme (INAU) in Rabat. Her research focuses on the roles of rural youth in agrarian and territorial transformations in Morocco, gender dynamics, and the governance of natural resources, particularly water and land, in rural areas. She explores the socio-economic and environmental changes shaping rural communities, with particular attention to youth engagement, the roles of women in sustaining oasis ecosystems, and agrarian transformations in oasis regions.

Lisa Bossenbroek

Dr. Lisa Bossenbroek is a rural sociologist whose research lies at the intersection of agrarian transformation, gender relations, and environmental change. She earned her Ph.D. in Rural Sociology from Wageningen University in 2016. Her work contributes to a deeper understanding of how environmental and socio-economic transformations shape rural communities, with a particular focus on gendered experiences and the aspirations of rural youth. Dr. Bossenbroek examines how rural women and other marginalized actors cope with resource scarcity, shifting agricultural systems, and evolving power dynamics in both local and transnational contexts. A key focus of her research is the role of female agricultural laborers—their lived experiences of agrarian change and their contributions to Morocco's evolving agricultural sector. In 2024, she co-edited the Routledge Handbook of Gender and Water Governance, a volume that expands and enriches feminist approaches to water governance.

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Introduction

Women agricultural workers are essential to the growth of Morocco's agricultural sector, yet they continue to face significant challenges. These include insecure employment (lack of contracts, social protection, etc.), undervaluation of their work, and limited recognition. This policy brief examines these issues and proposes actionable solutions to enhance their working conditions.

I. The Feminization of Agricultural Labor in Morocco

The agricultural sector holds an important and relatively stable position in the Moroccan economy, accounting for approximately 12.5% of GDP since the 2000s. It provides about 33.2% of total employment (in 2019) and 52.1% of female employment.[1] Seven main production regions can be identified: Saiss, Berkane, Tadla, Souss, Gharb, Loukkos, and Haouz. However, due to changes in water availability and quality, irrigation frontiers are shifting and expanding further south-east, towards areas such as Boudnib and Dakhla. These emerging regions are expected to become significant hubs, increasingly attracting agricultural labor.

Over the past few decades, rural women have entered paid agricultural labor on a large scale, responding to a rising demand for workers driven by agricultural intensification, the expansion of irrigated land, and the agricultural sector's increasing orientation toward exports. These dynamics entrench a hierarchical and gendered labor structure specific to the agricultural sector. Men occupy the more technical, better-paid, and contract-based positions, while women remain concentrated in the lowest and most precarious tiers, with few opportunities for upward mobility. Although some women secure contracts on large farms, the majority work without legal protections, exposed to poor working conditions and socio-economic insecurity. They gather daily at the mouqef—informal labor markets located on the outskirts of the various small agricultural centers—where they are selected for daily work and transported in open vehicles to the fields (see picture 1).



■ [1] Data available at the International Fund for Agricultural Development

II. The Faces of Labor: Characteristics of Female Agricultural Workers

Women working in agriculture often have limited alternatives, as their wages are crucial for sustaining their families. Their generally low levels of education further restrict employment prospects. As a subpopulation, however, they are not homogenous. Despite facing common challenges, women agricultural workers are a diverse group represent a diverse group of rural women, varying in marital status, age, and place of origin.

For many, earnings are not just supplementary but the main, or sometimes the sole, source of household income. Some are supporting families due to a sick or unemployed husband or father, while others have taken on this role after being abandoned by their spouse. This financial strain forces them to persist in difficult and often exploitative working conditions, with little choice but to accept low wages and poor labor terms. Furthermore, on top of paid labor, these women typically shoulder the additional burden of unpaid care work, returning home after long hours in the fields to care for children and other relatives while also managing household tasks.

III. The Challenges and Insecurities of Female Agricultural Workers

A. Social Stigma and Recognition

Ethnographic research among female agricultural workers in Morocco reveals the deep social stigma they endure within their communities. These women are often the target of gossip and derogatory labels such as "easy women," "husband stealers," or "distractions for farmers." Their virtue is regularly called into question, particularly for those who seek daily work at the mouqef.

Naima, a 50-year-old agricultural worker from the Saïss region, captures this sentiment: "Here, it's frowned upon (ayb) for a woman to work... If you work with a man, people will assume you're his girlfriend."

This stigma is closely tied to entrenched gender norms and cultural expectations in rural areas, where women must navigate social pressures while asserting their right to participate in agricultural labor.

B. Poor Working Conditions with High Risks and Insecurities

Women laboring in agriculture often endure long working hours. They often start early in the morning and end late in the evening. For those working in the mouqef, they must be there as early as 4 or 5 a.m., depending on the season, to find a job for the day.

In addition, many face different forms of harassment in the workplace, including verbal, sexual, and physical violence. Such incidents are rarely reported, as many women fear being blamed or further stigmatized. Transportation adds another layer of risk. With no safe or reliable options, women workers are packed into overcrowded vehicles or pickup trucks far beyond legal capacity.

The work environment on farms also poses serious health and safety risks. Women labor under extreme heat, prolonged sun exposure, dust, and frequent contact with industrial fertilizers. For certain tasks, such as onion transplanting or strawberry picking, workers are forced to remain bent over for hours at a time, leading to physical strain and long-term health issues. Compounding matters, women navigate these conditions while lacking essential labor protections such as social security and retirement benefits, leaving them vulnerable to illness, injury, or poverty in old age. Gender-based discrimination resulting in wage gaps and limited access to advancement opportunities further intensifies hardships. Together, these factors intensify the socio-economic precarity of women agricultural workers and reinforce the social stigma attached to their work.

C. Economic Difficulties

As intimated, female agricultural workers face significant economic hardships. These largely derive from the precarious and seasonal nature of their employment. Daily wages are generally low, generally ranging from 60 to 100 Dirhams (6 to 10 euros) per day. Compensation does fluctuate with labor demand, though. During peak season, when demand is high, wages can jump as high as 150 to 200 Dirhams (15 to 20 euros) a day. During low seasons, however, many women struggle to secure any kind of employment—particularly older women, who are frequently passed over by employers. In the mouqef of Taoujdate, in the Saïss plain, for instance, it is common to see women, especially the older ones, still waiting past 11 a.m., hoping to be hired, even though the typical workday begins as early as 6 a.m.

Voices from Mouqef: Zahra's Journey of Survival

I live in Bouderbala where I rent a room for 300 dirhams (about 30 euro's) a month, but I am originally from Taounat. I have been here for 8 years. When I came, I was married, but now I am divorced. I have one child who is in the first year of middle school. I work to provide for his needs. I am 39 years old, but looking at me, you would think I am 50. It was my husband who brought me here to Taoujdate, and that's where I started working in agriculture. My husband is also from Taounat. He used to beat and mistreat me. He would demand money from me to buy cigarettes and cannabis. And when I was late coming home from work, he accused me of cheating on him.

I go to the mouqef every day. The time I spend at work depends on the opportunities. If I find work, I can stay at the workplace until 6 pm. For example, for weeding, we work from 6 am to 2 pm. Sometimes we work on a task-based basis; we finish a job, like loading a truck with onions, and then we leave. The availability of work at the mouqef depends on market dynamics. When there is high demand (for potatoes and onions) in the major markets, buyers (Kheddar) are more present and they need more labor. We are paid per task and earn between 80 and 120 dirhams per day (between 8 and 12 euros).

We (female laborers) don't like staying at the mouqef. It's very humiliating (dem dialna taytuh men lhya), but I have no other alternatives. If I could find another stable job, even if it paid only 50 dirhams a day, I would take it. At least I would be sheltered from the cold, the heat, and the people. Some women have gotten used to the mouqef, but I can't. At the workplace, we face many problems. The other day, a farmer wanted to hit me. We work in mixed teams, made up of men and women. It's better to work in mixed groups because the men help us with tasks that we can't do alone. For example, for the onions, the women fill the crates, and the men load them onto the truck. However, the downside is that some men are respectful, but others are not.

IV. Navigating Vulnerability in Times of Crisis

The combination of precarious working conditions, low wages, and constant exposure to risk makes female agricultural workers acutely vulnerable. They are often among the first to feel the impacts of health, economic, and environmental crises.

This was made plain during the Covid-19 pandemic, as our interviews attest. At that time, women agricultural workers were caught in a dilemma: risk exposure to the virus by continuing to work outside (thereby being able to provide for their families) or stay home to protect their loved ones. Zahra, an agricultural worker from the Saïss plain interviewed at the time, expressed this tension clearly: "We are afraid for ourselves and our families. If we bring back contaminated groceries or touch something infected outside, we could bring the virus home."

The strict lockdown measures, which began on March 20, 2020, also had a direct impact on employment opportunities. With gatherings, including those at the mouqef, prohibited, many women were left without a way to secure daily work. Those who did manage to find jobs had to take detours along secondary roads to avoid detection by local authorities or walk long distances to reach farms.

Making matters worse, the lockdown coincided with a peak agricultural season across major farming regions. In the Saïss plain, it was the period for onion transplanting, while in Gharb, it marked the harvest of red fruits. Typically, high-demand season allows agricultural workers to negotiate better wages and save part of their income for the lean months ahead. However, during the pandemic, female workers were confined to their homes, unable to access the mouqef due to the ban on public gatherings.

V. Shifting Landscapes: Women Laboring Amidst Expanding Agricultural Frontiers

Drought and shifting water availability have pushed some farmers to abandon agriculture altogether. In the regions affected, this has led to significant job losses for women workers. At the same time, agricultural frontiers are expanding into arid regions in the South and South-East of Morocco, areas that historically saw little farming activity. These emerging agricultural zones now generate a growing demand for cheap labor, much of which is filled by women.

For instance, near the oasis of Akka Ighane (a village located in the province of Tata, in the southeast of Morocco), women have recently begun working in watermelon fields, where agricultural jobs for women were previously scarce. While some workers expressed relief at finding paid employment, this new opportunity comes with heightened risks. In addition to the precarious conditions outlined earlier, women must now contend with the harsh environment of these arid zones, where springtime temperatures during the watermelon harvest can soar to 35-40°C.

VI. Balancing Drudgery and Independence: The Complex Reality of Women in Agricultural Work

Despite the precarious nature of their work, the experiences of female agricultural laborers are not exclusively negative. While many describe agricultural labor as *tamara*—a word denoting hardship and drudgery—some view it as a chance to reconnect with friends, share experiences, and temporarily “escape” family pressures. For many, it offers rare access to paid employment in rural areas where such opportunities for women are limited. Income not only provides a degree of financial independence but also enhances their influence in household decision-making. These women often carry personal ambitions, channeling their earnings into their children’s education to secure for them “a better future and the chance to obtain a respectable job later on”.

VII. Conclusions and Recommendations

Although women agricultural workers are essential to Morocco’s agricultural development, their working conditions are precarious, and their struggles rarely attract sustained public or political attention. It is only in the event of roadside accidents or when they fall victim to major crises, such as the mass contamination of female laborers in the food processing industry during COVID-19[2], that their plight receives media attention.

Localized initiatives—primarily led by civil society organizations—have emerged in key agricultural regions such as in the Souss. These include the Youda digital awareness campaign, launched by the Young Women’s Group for Democracy (GJFD). The campaign was launched to address domestic violence against female agricultural workers during the COVID-19 lockdown. A nationwide campaign was also recently organized by the National Union of Agricultural Workers of Chtouka Ait-Baha (in the Souss region). Running from December 16 to 29 of 2024, this campaign aimed to mobilize agricultural workers across Morocco, raising awareness and protesting against poor working conditions. It called for urgent reforms, including the protection of trade union rights, stronger labor safeguards, improvements to the compensation system for workplace accidents, and enhanced occupational health and safety.[3]

Despite the difficulties of their lives, women working in agriculture are not passive victims. Many actively develop strategies to protect themselves, improve their working conditions, and resist negative social stereotypes. At the mouqef, they often organize into groups and appoint a leader to negotiate wages and terms of employment, particularly during peak seasons when labor demand is high. Some also participate in collective actions, such as strikes, to challenge exploitative conditions, as demonstrated by the female agricultural workers of Chtouka Ait Baha.[4]

In order to address the challenges faced by women agricultural workers effectively, recognizing the heterogeneity of their experiences is a prerequisite. The reality is that women employed on large farms in the Souss region face conditions vastly different from those encountered by mouqef workers or women cutting alfalfa in oases in exchange for in-kind wages. In light of this, interventions must be tailored to the specific needs of each group of women workers. They also must be aligned with Morocco’s broader social policy framework aimed at supporting vulnerable populations.

[2] Solene Paillard, “Les ouvrières agricoles toujours surexposées au risque de contamination au virus”, *Medias 24* (September 3, 2024)

[3] Samir Lagsir, “Campagne nationale pour défendre les droits des travailleurs agricoles de Chtouka Ait-Baha due 16 au 29 décembre”, *Medias 24* (December 22, 2024)

[4] Abdel Latif Baraka, “Les ouvriers agricoles de Chtouka se mobilisent pour la justice sociale”, *Hiba Press* (November 25, 2024).

For policymakers, we recommend that reform start from the following two premises:

Recognition and visibility:

- Acknowledge and value women’s labor as a cornerstone of Moroccan agriculture. This can be achieved by ensuring that data collection, conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture and other relevant institutions, systematically captures informal labor, including agricultural work performed without formal contracts, and is disaggregated by gender to fully reflect the scale and nature of women’s contributions to agricultural production.
- Ensure women have equal access to technical training, leadership programs, and support for farm diversification or entrepreneurial initiatives.
- Make the contributions of female agricultural laborers visible in public and policy debates by:
 - (i) Launching awareness campaigns (radio, TV, social media, community events) to highlight their role in food security and rural economies.
 - (ii) Drawing inspiration from initiatives like Tunisia’s “The Woman with the Headscarf,” honoring female agricultural workers.
 - (iii) Supporting research and media projects that amplify their voices and experiences.

Safe and Dignified Working Conditions:

- Provide safe, reliable transportation to reduce the risks associated with overcrowded and unsafe vehicles. The state or local authorities should partner with cooperatives or private transport providers to create subsidized, safe shuttle services dedicated to transporting agricultural workers, especially women, to and from farms.
- Strengthen labor regulations to protect agricultural workers' health by:
- Increasing labor inspections, especially in remote areas, to ensure compliance with safety standards.
- Mandating employers to provide free protective equipment (gloves, masks, hats, appropriate clothing) for tasks involving chemicals or harsh conditions.