



Building MENA Climate Resilience

Engaging Women of Faith in Food Systems Transformation

– A Faith + Food Coalition Report –

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Table of Contents

Authors	2
Introduction	3
Context	4
Format	4
Overview	5
Outcomes	6
1. Climate change damages food sources and production, and limits women’s empowerment.....	7
2. War, conflict, occupation, and displacement imperil food access.....	9
3. Patriarchal cultures dehumanize and limit women’s potential	11
Conclusion	13
Appendices	
A. Faith + Food Coalition Member Organizations	14
B. Faith + Food Coalition Steering Committee	15

Authors

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Introduction

In May 2022, the Faith + Food Coalition, the Alliance of NGOs and CSOs for South-South Cooperation (ANSSC), and Global One 2015 organized a private dialogue with local women leaders in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The dialogue focused on women of faith and the challenges of food security and climate change in the region. This report summarizes their insights and serves to inform United Nations Member States and the MENA region of key challenges that are emerging from the lived experiences of women as they work to address food systems transformation.

“Talking of climate change is good; it’s a catchy slogan. However, the reality, woman’s reality, reveals different challenges in so many fields.”

This dialogue informed “Building MENA Climate Resilience through Engaging Women of Faith in Food Systems Transformation,” a global dialogue [streamed live](#) from Bonn, Germany, on June 7, 2022. Longer term, the outcomes from this dialogue will be indispensable in developing the pathway to sustainable food systems within the MENA region.

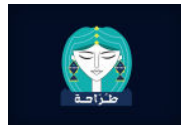
The women participants are leaders within their communities and are vital to the wellbeing of society, and they hope their voices, their actions, and the challenges they raise in this report will lead to meaningful change.



Context

The May 2022 dialogue was organized by the [Faith + Food Coalition \(FFC\)](#), an interfaith group of faith-based organizations, the [Alliance of NGOs and CSOs for South-South Cooperation \(ANSSC\)](#), and [Global One 2015](#). This group agreed upon an internal set of principles, which include respect for one another's beliefs and traditions; commitment to elevating human rights; being open to difference; resolving conflict through mediated dialogue; and amplifying underrepresented voices. Panelists were consciously chosen to hold a commitment to community development and principles of justice and equity in their work.

Panelists represented their organizations working on the frontlines but spoke under the conditions of personal anonymity fearing social and domestic retribution for speaking to the truth of their realities. The women on the panel spoke to domestic violence, sexual coercion, gender-based violence, extortion, and other such horrors that they must endure to put food on the family's table.



The panelists represented broad, community-based voices from the MENA food system: Algeria (UNFA), Egypt (Torraha), Jordan, Libya (Libyan Women's Union), Palestine (Wefaq Society), Syria (Organization Alamman), Tunisia (National Union of Tunisian Women), Western Sahara (WUSW), Yemen (Forcibly Displaced Foundation for Development and Rights).

Format

A hybrid dialogue was created to bring together multi-stakeholder, regional participants to create opportunities for different points of view, points of divergence, and emergence in understanding how food systems need to transform.

This platform allowed women from different faiths, sects, traditions, countries, and industries to represent their full selves and to learn (1) where are the gaps and failures in the current food system and (2) what is needed to bring about positive, meaningful change to those systems.

Overview

Food is a human right. Current food systems in the MENA region are under stress due to climate change, resource deficiencies, and armed conflicts. Underserved communities—whether due to chronic systemic failures, gender-based discrimination, or displacement due to conflict—are facing alarming levels of food insecurity and in some cases, starvation. The extraordinary conditions place a disproportionate burden on women and girls, who because of cultural and patriarchal standards, are responsible for producing and providing food for the family and extended community. Women are vulnerable to gender-based violence in and out of the home as well as susceptible to other forms of extortion and violence in the fields, marketplaces, and refugee camps.

Climate change will worsen conditions in the region if action is not taken at the global, national, and regional level to reduce fossil fuel emissions, restore ecosystems, and eliminate extractive practices. This dialogue revealed the critical need for contextually, culturally, and geographically specific solutions that address the grassroots reality of food systems and do not rely only on top-down approaches.



True change occurs in a society because of shifts in values and worldview. In the time of the climate emergency, the question is whether communities will have these shifts imposed upon them or if they proactively adopt them. Our speakers spoke to the rise in conflict that has led to resource, food, and water insecurity. Climate change is exacerbating existing systemic failures, forcing individuals across the MENA region into compromising, violent circumstances that, if unaddressed, could spin further turmoil.

We hope that this dialogue and the others that we will host can help contribute to the growing body of work that is reshaping food systems within the MENA region and bring hope and help to those who need it most.

Outcomes

The focus of the dialogue was an exploration of women leaders and building climate resilience in food systems in the MENA region. The panelists had a rich dialogue that identified three key challenges:

1

Climate change damages food sources and production, and limits women's empowerment

2

War, conflict, occupation, and displacement imperil food access

3

Patriarchal cultures dehumanize and limit women's potential

Climate change damages food sources and production, and limits women's empowerment

Food insecurity is particularly high in the MENA region, impacting up to 48 percent of the population in some areas, according to the [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO). Climate change has created a raft of economic crises resulting in higher unemployment and financial insecurity, which has led to an increase in domestic violence towards women and children.

Farm work—both seasonal and permanent—is increasingly challenging to find due to hotter temperatures. Those who do work in the fields are susceptible to a variety of health issues from exposure to extreme heat and direct sun exposure (e.g., skin cancer). Individuals and family farms are less productive due to an inability to adapt to the instability of fluctuating crop yields and increased food costs due to unpredictable climatic conditions. As a result, prices are rising for common fruits, vegetables, and grains—which drives food insecurity across the region.

*“Climate change has impacted the northern areas; we have a lot of cases of crops burning. This leads to women not being able to obtain daily meals.”
(Tunisia)*

In addition, water sources in the region are increasingly stressed, leading to water insecurity and aridification. The once favorable weather and reliable seasonal rains have been replaced by unbearable heat and extreme winter conditions that prevent consistent harvests. Ongoing war, conflict, occupation lead existing water sources to become polluted. For example, waste is thrown into the farming fields, harming production yields.

In Tunisia, several factors—both natural and human-made—have harmed the climate, including the burning of fossil fuels, which releases gas and chemicals that have damaged the ozone layer and poison the environment. On the grain fields, there is a serious shortage of crops and fruitful trees that thrive in cooler weather. The production of olives and oil has dropped, resulting in decreased exports, and women were the first to lose jobs. With all these issues, there is no clear strategy from the state due to a lack of capabilities; there must be international support to solve the crisis and resist disasters.

In Jordan, rural women lack awareness about climate change. There are initiatives to educate people, but it is just not enough. For example, most of the participating women in the Subihi



Pioneering Women's Charitable Association self-sufficiency project are not aware of the dangers of automobile exhaust. Moreover, they often rely on imported food products and ready-to-eat foods, despite Jordan's rich tradition of cooking at home and using garden space to cultivate basic ingredients for food recipes. "The majority of Jordanian houses have a garden or a land space where we encourage housewives to plant

herbs, Za'atar and Zafaran, which generates modest extra income and [allows them to] use their time effectively," says the organization's chair. "We work on developing the connection between the woman and food ingredients."

Using their own space and optimizing land use to harvest herbs and essential vegetables enables women to generate income without the need to travel—invaluable flexibility in the face of extreme weather that can threaten health, safety, and social customs.

Solutions

It is critical to educate the youth/future generations about climate change impacts. This can be achieved through a simple, easily understood podcast aimed for children. Workshops, shadow theater, and webinars are other methods to focus on topics like recycling, the importance of forests and wildfires, consumption of fish and marine life, minimizing plastic usage, or highlighting indigenous fruits and vegetables.

Policy Recommendations

- Human health is linked to the health of the Earth. Implement the [WHO One Health](#) model to create nutritious, just, and climate-resilient food systems.
- Invest in community education programs on climate adaptation and facilitate technology transfer for women farmers through United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [Climate Technology Centre and Network](#).
- Divest from fossil fuels infrastructure and invest in renewable energy sources.

War, conflict, occupation, and displacement imperil food access

With the backdrop of war, occupation, and displacement, the MENA region is home to poor economies and limited employment opportunities. For example, prior to the Saudi war, many Yemenis worked in Saudi Arabia as a main source of income. After the war erupted, many Yemenis were forcibly displaced back to Yemen. New regulations, like raising sponsor fees to come back to Saudi Arabia were implemented, now make it difficult for Yemenis to get work there. As a result of little to no income, Yemeni women struggled to secure food for their families.

*“They are just women without any weapon, they are not bombing or harming anyone or anything. No need to make it worse by these kinds of acts of war.”
(Palestine)*

There is a deep emotional toll exacted on the children of displaced people. This is especially true for preschool children, who cannot understand the dramatic change to their lives. It is challenging to explain to young children why they no longer can have the same cereal for breakfast and must have different—or no—fruits for snacks. Displaced Yemeni mothers must monitor their children’s mental health and navigate explanations about war and economics, such as why they had to leave the home that expelled them. Refugee or displaced mothers have a duty to adapt their children to a new, inferior lifestyle—and the social prejudice of becoming the “other” because of factors completely outside of their control.

Before their funding was cut due to the Syrian war, in the Idlib region (in northwestern Syria), local community activists worked to empower women economically, focusing their projects on recycling plastics. Now that the funding is gone, the projects are no longer operational. In addition, with no funding, there is no one to monitor or discourage the pervasive sexual harassment and abuse, most of which is linked to food insecurity, that occurs in the camps.

There is a major gap in collaborative work between women from different faiths. Despite women’s will and intention to work together, the political environment—especially in the MENA region—means that Initiatives are rare and often reluctant.

*“The Jordanian woman today is undergoing daily stress, hardship, and degradation due to the upstream diversion of Yarmok river to Israel. Simply, we do not have water at home; we must buy 90 percent of our consumption”
(Jordan)*

Solutions

Before their funding was cut due to the Syrian war, in the Idlib region (in northwestern Syria), local community activists worked to empower women economically, focusing projects on recycling plastics as well as monitoring food security and the sexual harassment and abuse connected to food insecurity.

Policy Recommendations

- Sensitize food systems transformation to the Climate - Gender - Conflict nexus and ensure that women of faith are key partners in the peace-building process for enduring and lasting peace.
- Invest in civil society organizations that hold refugee camp staff accountable for gender-based violence and sexual exploitation.
- Partner with faith-based organizations to host human rights training workshops for communities to remind them of God-given, inherent rights for women.
- Food is a fundamental human right. Invest in solutions that empower women in food-insecure communities like refugee camps not only to obtain food but also to have agency over the creation and production of their own food systems.
- Fund trainings for projects in knowledge sharing between displaced women and local women from Christian, Druze, and Muslim faiths, specifically concerning food preservation and management.
- Facilitate and fund opportunities for interfaith initiatives in the region to support peace work and collaborative efforts around skill building, resource sharing, and land management.

Patriarchal cultures dehumanize and limit women's potential

In the MENA region, a woman's role is to secure food for her family. This is typically in the form of farming and herding. As a result of some non-profit projects that are designed to help women, they inadvertently provide more economic opportunities for women compared to men. This leads to a power imbalance where women are in the fields and men end up staying at home. As a result, domestic violence rates have [increased](#). Women are culturally expected to cook, work, and raise children, and if they are perceived as being too feminist, they receive pressure—and in some instances, violence—from men to be the perfect woman. Conversely, if men do want to help at home and support their wives, this is sometimes met with stigmatization from their male peers.

“I wish that women are more appreciated for the effort they give, either in their family or in their society—especially for men to value their effort and hard work in trying to satisfy everyone.”
(Algeria)

The south of Algeria is known for its extreme heat and harsh weather. The women there tend to livestock and manage poultry, and rely on artisanal jobs such as rug making, which is done in a group. Due to climate change, temperatures can now reach 50.5°C (122.9°F) in the region, which means streets are empty during the day. Going to market to sell and shop has shifted to the evening hours, which is unconventional for women and creates new risks for assault. The extreme heat also severely limits a woman's potential to earn income during the summer.

In Tunisia, the agricultural sector is one of the most important sectors that contribute to achieving food security, and Tunisian women represent 85 percent of workers in the agricultural sector. Women represent only 16 percent of landowners, however. This disparity leads to many difficulties that deprive women of their most basic rights, as well as exacerbates wage inequality and unsafe working conditions. Women often are forced to work for more than 12 hours a day. In addition, women face high risks from simply traveling to fields. Each year, the country records a significant number of deaths among women from traffic accidents as they walk to or from work.

Solutions

There is a pertinent need to speed up finding radical solutions for the community woman who makes every effort to revive the economy and thus achieve food security. To build more resilience, processes to create land ownership for women who directly work and farm the land are required.

*“It is true that climate change is affecting our everyday lives as women in Jordan. But more than that is the societal custom that deprives women from their inheritance of land, hence any chance of empowerment.”
(Jordan)*

Policy Recommendations

- Subsidize healthy, climate resilient, nutritious, local plant-centered growing practices to allow competitiveness with global markets at the local level.
- Restore degraded land, protect ecosystems, and facilitate connections for women farmers to competitive markets to produce better health, social, economic, and ecological outcomes.
- Create supplemental pathways at international organizations to help fund women leaders and grassroots, women-led organizations. Barriers of language, awareness, lack of connections, and formal processes at many international NGOs, often deter women from pursuing funding opportunities.
- Engage international organizations to provide R&D expertise to support new ideas to adapt to climate change. Often grassroots, women-led organizations have unique ideas but either lack confidence or are not supported in implementing their solutions.
- Revisit and innovate the traditional food recycling programs and production systems already established in local communities. Many are nonfunctional or neglected by current food systems, but they could improve nutrition and food access.

Conclusion

Climate change, chronic system failures, resource deficiencies, and armed conflict have combined to create alarming levels of food insecurity, and even starvation, in the MENA region. Local customs and culture, especially traditions of patriarchy, place a disproportionate burden on women and girls, who are expected to produce and provide food. At the same time, women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, and other lethal risks in farms, fields, marketplaces, and refugee camps.

Climate change is exacerbating systemic failures, driving some people from their homes, forcing others into dangerous living and working conditions, and creating a generally precarious environment that could easily slide into deadly turmoil.

The women on our panel spoke to the climate crisis and other factors, notably the rise in armed conflict, that has led to resource, food, and water insecurity. They focused on the critical need for contextually, culturally, and geographically specific solutions—including education, community engagement, NGO involvement, and economic development—to address the grim reality that women in the region often face.



They provided specific policy recommendations that would protect women and girls from harm, empower women to reshape their communities, build resilience, promote economic development, and stabilize and improve local food systems. They identified the need for interfaith initiatives that include all women in the MENA region so that they can benefit from each other's skills, knowledge, and resources.

Food is a human right. These women's voices have spoken eloquently about the reality of food insecurity, and dangers that flow from that insecurity, in the region. They have identified ways to reshape food systems to reduce hunger and promote health, bringing hope and help to those who need it most. It's time to listen and act.

Appendix A. Faith + Food Coalition Member Organizations

Bhumi Global (<https://www.bhumiglobal.org>) envisions a world where balance is restored between humans and the natural world. Based on Hindu principles of environmental care, Bhumi Global engages, educates, and empowers people and communities to address the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation (<https://tzuchi.us>) is a global non-profit humanitarian organization founded in 1966 by Dharma Master Cheng Yen, a Buddhist nun in Taiwan. Its missions of medicine, charity, education, and humanistic culture have brought relief to more than 102 countries. The heart of Tzu Chi is embedded in its name: in Chinese, “tzu” (compassion) and “chi” (relief).

The **Center for Earth Ethics** (<https://centerforearthethics.org>) works to change the dominant value system from one based on short-term material gain to one based on the long-term health of the whole community of life. CEE uses its unique convening power to tackle pressing issues, speaking truth to power and amplifying voices of those working along the margins.

The **Islamic Medical Association of North America** (<https://imana.org>) positively impacts the health of humanity through integrated programs, with a major emphasis on global medical relief. IMANA fosters health promotion, disease prevention, and health maintenance in communities around the world through direct patient care, health programs, and advocacy.

The **Interfaith Public Health Network** (<https://www.iphnetwork.org>) engages and mobilizes faith communities to improve population health, addressing the underlying determinants of health (social, commercial, environmental, and political) through connecting partners, convening dialogues, cultivating population health understanding, and catalyzing positive social change.

One of the world’s premier interfaith convening organizations, the **Parliament of the World’s Religions** (<https://parliamentofreligions.org>) envisions a world of peace, justice, and sustainability. The Parliament cultivates harmony among religious and spiritual communities and fosters their engagement with the world and its guiding institutions to address the critical issues of our time.

The **World Evangelical Alliance** (<https://worldea.org>) is a network of churches in 129 nations joined to give a worldwide identity, voice, and platform to more than 600 million evangelical Christians. WEA seeks to strengthen local churches through national alliances, supporting and coordinating grassroots leadership, and seeking practical ways of showing the unity of the body of Christ.

Appendix B. Faith + Food Coalition Steering Committee

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