

# Female Farm Workers in Morocco: Between Laborious Working Conditions and Environmental Challenges

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**Abstract.** The present paper posits that female labor force in the Moroccan agricultural sector plays a crucial role in production and provides specific expertise, leading to an increasingly visible feminization of the sector. Taken into consideration their invaluable contributions, the primary objective of this field-based study is to unveil the working conditions that female farm workers endure, including extended working hours, high physical demands, and health risks caused by either climate change or industrial fertilizers. It also seeks to comprehend gender stereotypes that perpetuate these inequalities. Consequently, this study avoids treating this group of women as a homogeneous ensemble. Instead, the purpose is to closely observe female workers and listen to their speeches to gain an insight into their daily experiences. This is achieved through a micro-sociological framework that involves direct observation of female workers on the farms, as well as semi-structured interviews. The research findings confirm that female workers encounter gender-based differentiations in the workplace, stigmatizing representations from their surroundings, and restrictions on access to the workplace. Additionally, they are subject to the negative impact of the working environment on their health and well-being.

**Index Terms**— Working women, Agriculture, Feminization, Gender stereotypes, Mouqef, Health risks, Climate change

## 1. Introduction

As a means of livelihood and social status, work is second to none. Both women and men have always been active in the labor market. However, with the democratization of education, women's participation has increased, which is evident in the growing feminization of the workforce and in the restructuring of the division of labor, thereby making gender diversity more conspicuous.

Catherine Omnès [1] highlights that despite the recent proliferation and expansion of scientific research on women's work, the representativeness of this work still struggles; the women's workforce is often associated with specific and derogatory aspects such as instability and low wages.

In Morocco, Meriem Rodary [2] argues that, contrary to popular belief, women's work is neither exceptional nor devalued by Moroccan society. However, the real challenge for women is to receive proper recognition and rewards for their work. The employment of women as workers began during the colonial period [3] with the establishment of industrial units in Casablanca, which required the participation of women to strengthen the male workforce. Studies have shown that female textile workers in the Industrial Zone of Rabat face deteriorating health conditions and various forms of insecurity on a daily basis, including exposure to harmful products, a noisy environment, and the stress of prolonged standing. These arduous working conditions have had a significant impact on the precarious experience of these women, who nevertheless hold on to their jobs and adopt strategies to negotiate their social status [4]. Despite the lack of official figures and the unofficial nature of women's agricultural work, the visibility of female farm workers makes their existence a reality, according to Ait Mous and Bossenbroek [5, 6].

The research begins by acknowledging the crucial role that female workers play in agricultural production, and the specific expertise they bring to the industry. This is reflected in the growing number of women working in the Moroccan agricultural sector [7]. Unfortunately, many of these women work unofficially, without financial stability or social insurance [8]. Due to the lack of professional qualifications and diplomas, women find themselves caught between the vagaries of life and the scarcity of employment opportunities and must turn to the unofficial sector of the economy, particularly agriculture. Women are attracted in this sector either locally, with an estimated employment rate of 34% [7, 9], or internationally. In 2019, there were 17,000 "Strawberry Ladies" working in Spain as part of a seasonal migratory flow [10]. These women are exploited by employers seeking to minimize expenses through a flexible, low-paid workforce. This raises important questions: What kind of women are most likely to choose this type of work? How do they experience their work in the fields? And how does their environment affect their daily lives?

The study focuses on women who work unofficially as agricultural laborers recruited through the *mouqefs* (a public space used to recruit workers for various unofficial activities). However, the purpose is not to view this group as a homogeneous ensemble engaged in arduous work and sensitive to socio-economic and agricultural sector changes from an external perspective. Instead, the aim is to closely observe female workers and listen to their speeches to gain a better understanding of their experiences and working conditions. It is important to avoid generalizations about this phenomenon and focus on the unique experiences of female workers.

The primary objective of this study is two-fold. Firstly, it aims to uncover the challenging working conditions that female farm workers encounter while being recruited from the *mouqefs*. Secondly, it aims to shed light on the various difficulties working women undergo, such as extended working hours, high physical demands, health risks, and inadequate safety standards. It is also necessary to comprehend and address gender stereotypes that may contribute to these working conditions.

To achieve these goals, this study employs a holistic approach to understand the daily lives of these workers. It is primarily based on a micro-sociological framework that involves direct observation of workers' activities throughout the four seasons of the year. Additionally, in-depth semi-structured interviews will complement the results of the observation and enhance the reflection.

## Research Maps

In this article, we begin with a brief summary. Next, we present a body of research related to our topic and connect it to our problem statement. We then outline our methodology and discuss the presentation and analysis of our findings. Finally, we conclude the paper with a general synthesis and a list of references for further research.

## 2. Methodology

The survey targeted female workers who work in agriculture and are recruited from the *mouqefs* of the Casablanca-Settat region. Nevertheless, a distinction should be made between the situation of these women and the profile of other female farm workers who hold a permanent contract (Contrat à Durée Indéterminée (CDI)). These workers have a fixed workplace and are affiliated with the National Social Security Fund and Pension Fund (as is the case with large farm workers). This category of women does not frequent the *mouqefs*. As regards the profile of working women studied here, these are those who work on small and medium-sized farms. Their work is unofficial and temporary, and their recruitment goes necessarily through the *mouqefs*. The study is based on direct observation of agricultural workers in their working environment. This method can demonstrate the true conditions of the worker's experience, their practice, their behavior and the interactions among the various actors on the farm.

However, direct observation does not mean turning a deaf ear to the statements and terminology used by the interviewees. It is rich and dense in information and the collected discourse is spontaneous and authentic in both time and space. In addition to observation, semi-structured interviews have been a great asset to this survey; their objective is to gain an insight into the daily lives of female farm workers. Their speech completed the results of the observation. An interview guide and an observation checklist were developed to facilitate data collection. In order to structure this data, it is necessary to encode them after the interviews have been transcribed.

The study takes place in the suburban area of the Greater Casablanca, where the most fertile lands of the metropolis are located. The region has a year-round recruitment campaign for agricultural workers. The duration of the study is six months distributed to cover different seasons all along the suburbs of Casablanca which are characterized by the dominance of small and medium-sized farms [11].

## 3. Data analysis

The survey covered different profiles, waving from semi-structured to spontaneously extemporized interviews in the fieldwork. It turned out that female workers were a heterogeneous group with different ages, marital status, and backgrounds. However, for all interviewees, this is a generally fragile and unstable situation. More than 49% of female workers are either widowed, divorced or abandoned with their children, 35% are married and the rest are single. Female workers range in age from 15 to 70, with 86% without schooling, 12% with primary level and 2% with secondary level.

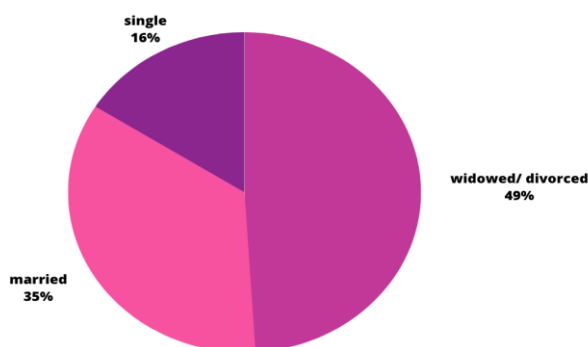


Figure 1: Marital status

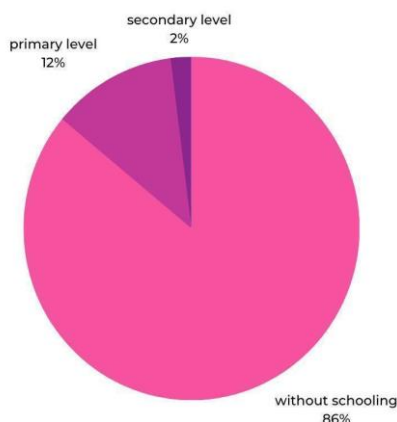


Figure 2: Level of education

All the interviewees lack diplomas and vocational training and the majority of them come from rural areas and poor farming families. These women find themselves in a situation where they have lost their husbands' financial support following a death or divorce, or are forced to help their husbands or their parents to cope with life's unforeseen circumstances. 45% of female workers have never done anything other than farming, 33% were housekeepers and 22% were industrial workers. They report dropping out of non-agricultural work for several reasons: low wages, continuous work that is not suitable for their family situation. Despite the difficult conditions in agriculture, female workers appreciate the flexibility that avails them of great freedom. They have the opportunity to take time off as they wish and to refuse the tasks that they deem arduous. The most important thing for these women is to work outdoors. "We work outside, we are not locked up," they say. Their rural background makes them prefer open spaces to enclosed areas.

Direct observation of agricultural work on small farms was carried out during February and June. The objective was to observe workers during cold and hot periods of the year. The number of workers recruited on these small farms did not exceed 30. Through

observation, it was possible to understand their conditions, the impact of environmental changes on their daily lives as well as their main agricultural tasks. It is important to note that the tasks of female workers may vary depending on the region, crop type, and specific farming practices of each farm. In addition, in the Casablanca region, agriculture is characterized by a great diversity of crops and agricultural technologies.

#### 4. Discussion

Depending on the season, farm workers start their day early, around 5:00 A.M in fall and winter, and as early as 3:00 A.M in spring and summer. Once in the *mouqef*, women find themselves in a competitive environment where they must seize every opportunity to get a job. They wait for employers and run after cars or vans as soon as they spot a potential employer. They hurry to be the first to approach him. This race for a living [12] is conducted on a daily basis. It is bread that is “hard to earn”, as they describe it referring to the drudgery and arduousness of the conditions of access to this type of work.

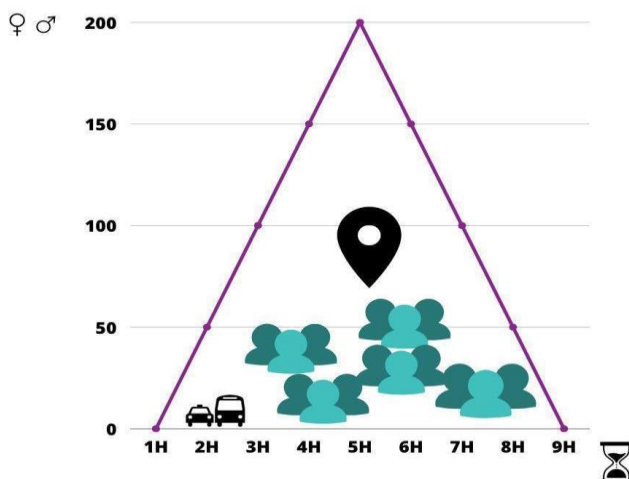


Figure 3: Illustration of workers in the *mouqef*

This figure shows that the *mouqef* is closely linked to the activity of its users who have a specific time during the day before it gets empty [13]. Recruitment in the *mouqef* is done after negotiating prices and working conditions with the farmer. It can be done either directly on site or indirectly by phone. Years of experience in the *mouqef* have established a trust relationship between workers and employers; a social network that has been built over the years. As a social space, the *mouqef* is subject to gender bias and it is generally regarded as a male space, while for women, it is still questionable. Working women find themselves singled out and surrounded by doubts about their attendance at such a place. A significant number of our interviewees revealed that they had never reported such attendance to their entourage. They don't want to be stigmatized, neither they nor their immediate family. Hiding the fact that they frequent this stigmatizing and demeaning space is expressed in the women's speeches and the way /they dress and veil their faces.

However, despite the flexibility of some social rules in the Moroccan society [14], there is still a poor perception of the existence of women on the street (*mouqef*). Women going

out at night to the *mouqef* is one of the elements of the social construction that stigmatizes this place [15]. Moreover, the use of the street as a recruitment space has led the *mouqfias* to pursue employers and negotiate with them. This image, reminiscent of women walking on “the sidewalk”, exposes these workers to a derogatory comparison in the eyes of society.

The study has confirmed the arduous nature of the agricultural work, with women working up to 10 hours a day under the rigorous supervision of corporals. They have a one-hour lunch break. During this break, they eat the food they bring with them: a tomato, cheese and olives with bread. Water and tea are provided by the employer in case of need. However, it is important to note that working up to 10 hours a day represents an intensive pace of work and requires constant physical effort. Besides, the close monitoring of the corporals can influence worker interactions and well-being. It should be noted that the lack of specific agricultural work uniforms and protective equipment such as gloves, boots or suitable footwear poses health risks for the workers. This situation exposes them to hazards such as injuries, chemical exposure and inclement weather.

According to INRS [16], the environment has a significant impact on the work flow. Extreme temperatures are a major factor of hardship either by exposure to high temperatures or activities performed in the cold. Outdoor work, as in the case of agriculture, entails a set of risks which vary depending on the individual's age, gender, work, working hours and rest time. This work indicates that female workers are continuously susceptible to cold and heat, working more than 10 hours a day under intense physical conditions and at high rates, from 7 A.M until 5 P.M. They work in an environment unprotected against wind, rain or sun, and with no shelter or dining space. Most of female workers suffer from acne, early wrinkles, brown spots, dry or dull skin, and aging of the epidermis caused by almost daily exposure to severe cold or heat. During the cold season, the decrease in temperature causes the soil to freeze and become wet and icy, resulting in greater fatigue and difficulty during work due to increased energy consumption [16]. The workers have confirmed that working in the cold causes frostbite, pain of varying intensity and Vasomotor Disorders such as the sensation of dead fingers. On the other hand, throughout heat waves, which last for much of the year in Morocco because of climate change, the intense heat can affect the body and lead to consequences such as excessive sweating, increased fatigue, severe headaches and agonizing cramps. Agricultural work poses an increased health risk to female workers. Safety and health in agriculture face several difficulties: the unofficial nature of the sector, the absence of State inspection and monitoring, and the lack of protective measures (work uniform, gloves, boots, etc.). Workers face risks that may lead to serious consequences (asthma attacks, allergies, etc.). Their bodies bear these risks, leaving marks visible to the naked eye.

Other major risks that add up to the vagaries of the weather are those of industrial fertilizers and pesticides. Heinrich Böll Foundation has conducted several studies on the impact of pesticides on Moroccan agriculture. The foundation states that many farmers use pesticides to protect their crops and achieve higher yields. A study conducted by the Moroccan association for Health, Environment and Toxicovigilance in 2020 found that 40 active substances, classified as Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs) by the international non-governmental organization Pesticide Action Network (PAN), were registered for agricultural use in Morocco in 2018. Although pesticides, whose usage has serious consequences for the environment, are designed to be biologically active and target pests, they may also affect non target organisms, including humans. This also poses a potential threat to natural ecosystems and the services they provide, such as water supply and food production. Prolonged exposure to these residues can cause medium- to long-term health problems for

farm workers. The use of inappropriate packaging or defective processing tools when using fertilizers increases the risks to human health and the environment, as confirmed by experts. Hence, agricultural workers are the first victims of these products. Failure to comply with instructions for pesticide use, such as wearing appropriate protective uniforms, masks, gloves, and other equipment, can lead to serious health problems.

Female farm workers bear the scars of the arduous nature of their work and the impact of the environment on their bodies. Physical alterations are visible to the naked eye, such as damaged nails, wrinkles and dehydrated and discolored skin caused by prolonged exposure to cold and heat. Due to the body posture in agricultural work, mainly bending the back, repetitive work requires increased use of the shoulders and feet, resulting in back, shoulder, and foot pain, let alone dermatological and respiratory diseases that are caused by inhalation and direct contact with industrial fertilizers. The body of a female farm worker reflects her social status [17], proves her precarious journey, and reveals the daily challenges she faces on the farm.

## 5. Conclusion

In the agricultural sector of Morocco, female farm workers are often recruited unofficially and without employment contracts or social insurance. They are subjected to long hours of work under harsh conditions, particularly in extreme temperatures, and are exposed to harmful pesticides that can affect their health. Additionally, they face discrimination based on their gender and socio-economic status.

Despite the widespread and visible reality of women's work in this sector, public policy still largely ignores their contributions, leading to an institutional underestimation of their crucial role. This marginalization and lack of recognition exacerbate their vulnerability and precariousness. Notwithstanding, many female farm workers view their work as providing a certain degree of autonomy and independence. Overall, these findings highlight the need for further investigation into this area to better understand the issues at stake and the prospects for improvement.

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