Fact sheet: Mauritania - Women, agriculture and rural development

Population:  2.1 million
Growth rate:  2.7 %
Fertility rate:  6.8
IMR:  117/1000 births
GNP/head:  US$ 530

Contents

Importance of agriculture to the economy
Role of women in agriculture
Sharing of power and decision-making
Mechanisms to promote the advancement of woman
Women's rights
Dimension and determinants of rural poverty
Access to agricultural resources and services
Selected programmes in support of women in agriculture, forestry and fisheries
Areas to be strengthened
Importance of agriculture to the economy

Mauritania's economy is dominated by agriculture, particularly the strong agro-pastoral sector. In 1992, agriculture accounted for 29% of the GDP and 63.6% of the labour force. Output of staple foods such as millet, sorghum, rice, and pulses is insufficient for the country's needs. A large part of Mauritania consists of arid/semi-arid land and is thus unsuitable for crop cultivation. Livestock rearing, however, plays an important role in the lives of rural people. Nomads comprised 12% of the population in 1988, compared to 73% in 1965. Fishing provides approximately 46% of the export earnings and contributes 5-10% of the annual GDP, as well as makes a significant contribution to domestic food requirements. Fish processing is the most important activity in the manufacturing sector and accounts for as much as 4% of the GDP.

Role of women in agriculture

Rural women play an essential role in agriculture. Although only 25.4% of women in the country are classified as employed, many more are active in unpaid work in the informal sector and agriculture. In addition, women perform tasks that are vital to food provision and the maintenance of the household. Women are involved in all phases of the agricultural cycle, including planting, weeding, the protection and maintenance of fields, and harvesting, conservation, storage, processing and marketing of produce. Women play an important role in
market gardening and in the processing of milk products. In the fishery sector, women play an important role in the processing and marketing of fish and fish products.

**Division of Labour by Gender.** Women's participation in nearly all aspects of agricultural and livestock activities is significant. Men are largely responsible for land clearing and for the cultivation of certain crops, such as wetland rice. Men also take care of the herding and watering of large animals, while the curing of skins, the processing of milk products, and the care of small ruminants and poultry is the task of women. In addition, women are responsible for household tasks, including food processing and preparation, water fetching and wood collection. Women are also the practitioners of traditional medicine.

According to the 1988 census, 35% of households are headed by women. The increasing migration of males to the cities has resulted in heavier work loads for women.

Although women in certain regions were traditionally responsible for rice cultivation, wetland rice cultivation is now largely the province of men, with women engaged mainly in irrigation, storage and marketing.

In some regions, both men and women are engaged in the construction of small dams.

**Gender Relations in Decision-making in Farming Activities.** Men of the extended families invariably make the major decisions on land transfer and agricultural investments. Although women generally do not own land or livestock, they usually make decisions on those aspects of the work for which they are responsible and on the income derived from their activities.

**Sharing of powder and decision-making**

For the most part, there is a lack of women's representation in all decision-making levels both in the public and private sectors.

**Members and Officers of Agricultural/Rural Organizations.** Although data is incomplete, women's membership in farmers organizations and village committees is increasing. The number of women's cooperatives has grown from 15 in 1982 to more than 500 in 1993. In addition, there are about 5000 cooperatives in the areas of agriculture, fishing and handicrafts with both men and women members. Data on membership and office holders of these associations is not gender disaggregated, and many of these cooperatives are inactive. Women head 2.6% of the livestock associations.

**Women in Decision-making Positions in Ministries and Government Bodies.** Out of a Cabinet of 22 formed in 1992, there is one woman who is in charge of the Department on the Status of Women. Few other women hold decision-making positions in ministries or other government bodies.

**Mechanisms to promote the advancement of woman**
**National Machinery.** A Secretariat of State on the Status of Women (SECF) was created in 1992. It is charged with developing a policy for the promotion and protection of women and children, promoting economic and educational activities for women, in collaboration with the concerned sectors, and developing programmes to promote the participation of women in the political, economic and social life of the country.

**WID Units or Focal Points in Technical Ministries.** An interministerial committee on women, family and children (COFFE) was formed in 1992 to evaluate and coordinate activities of the technical departments that target women.

Women in Decision-making Positions in Ministries and Government Bodies, 1992

![Graph showing women in decision-making positions in Ministries and Government Bodies, 1992](source: National Sectoral Report on Women, Agriculture and Rural Development, 1994)
Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). There are very few national NGOs and only a small number of international NGOs present in the country. About a dozen NGOs are members of an informal Federation of NGOs in Mauritania. A number of NGOs have project components targeted at women.

Women's rights

Mauritania has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Mauritania has four areas of law which effect women in different ways: Islamic law; Customary African law; Customary Arabic-Bedouin and Berber law; and, (modern) Civil law

Women's rights in marriage are precarious, especially under Islamic and customary African law. There have been several attempts to draw up a legal code for women and the family. A new draft code has been drawn up and is being circulated to women's structure by the Secretariat of State for the Status of Women for information, discussion and approval.

Due to their high rate of illiteracy, women are often not aware of their rights, and information concerning women's rights is insufficiently distributed.

Dimension and determinants of rural poverty

· Economic crises since 1973.
· Environmental degradation and repeated drought.
· Women's position in society and a general lack of accounting for their needs.
· Lack of access to agricultural technologies, means, and methods.
· Structural adjustment programmes adopted in 1989.
· Lack of training.
· Increasing sedentarism and urbanization has led to an exodus of men to the urban areas, leaving women to run households on increasingly marginal lands.
· Illiteracy and lack of access to formal education for children, especially girls.
Access to agricultural resources and services

**Land.** Few women own land. In the traditional economy, women, youth, and the servant class are not landowners. Decisions on and-use are generally determined by men and the elderly. In 1983, an attempt to reform land tenureship was not widespread.

**Livestock.** Both men and women are engaged in livestock, with men responsible for large animals and women for small ruminants and poultry as well as for the processing of animal products. Data is not available on ownership, but women generally make decisions on the income derived from their activities.

**Forestry.** Although data collection is needed, reforestation projects generally do not take into account the needs of women, who are those primarily concerned with the gathering of forest products.

**Water.** In many places, women and men participate equally in the construction of dams, weirs and breakwaters. Data collection is needed on water supply.

**Credit.** Women have difficulty accessing credit from formal banking institutions as they do not own land and other collateral. Women's access to credit is primarily through traditional savings groups; data collection is needed on these groups.

**Extension services and agricultural training.** There is little information on women's access to extension services or their participation in agricultural training. Only about 30% of women are literate, compared to about 50% of men. In 1991 about 55% of all children attended primary schools: 63% of all boys, and 48% of all girls. However, with regards to secondary schools (age 12 and up), 14% of all children attended: 19% of all boys and 10% of all girls. Gender disaggregated figures for tertiary education are not available.

In 1988, there was a total of only 97 agricultural extension staff, including 3 women, or about 3% of the total.

Agricultural Extension Staff by Position and Gender. 1989
Selected programmes in support of women in agriculture, forestry and fisheries

Policy Planning and Research

- The Secretariat of State for the Status of Women (SECF), with other ministries such as the Ministry of Rural Development and the Environment, are engaged in: drawing up a
national plan and strategy for the integration of rural women in agriculture; developing gender analysis training; and, collecting information on the work of rural women.

· The national level staff of the SECF are being trained in analysis and planning, and the regional level staff in planning, monitoring and evaluation of women's programmes and projects.

· A documentation centre on women, the family and children, as well as a data bank on women's cooperatives are being developed.

Legal and Policy Reform

· A draft family code is being developed.

Access to Agricultural Resources and Services

· A number of projects or project components are directed to improving women's access to credit, technologies such as improved stoves, and functional literacy.

Areas to be strengthened

Policy Planning and Research.

· The Secretariat of State on the Status of Women needs to be strengthened in terms of staff and financing.

· Data collection, statistics and research on women's roles in and contribution to agriculture should be increased.

· Gender training should be extended to staff at the national and regional levels.

Access to Agricultural Resources and Services

· Greater efforts are needed to improve women's access to credit, education and technical training, income-generating activities, extension, water supply, wood fuel, and appropriate technologies, particularly for food processing.

· Women's groups should be strengthened and women's participation promoted in village structures, particularly in the planning, implementation and evaluation phases of projects.
