



Global Food Crisis: Updates from the MENA Region

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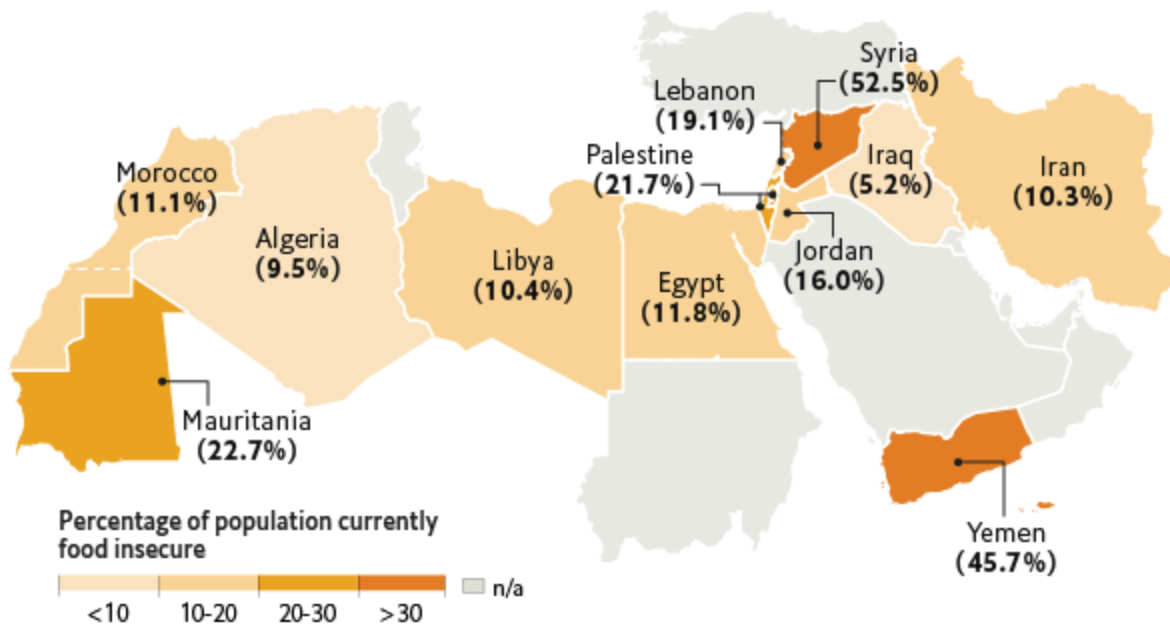
Introduction

The war in Ukraine has added yet another layer to the food crisis that has been prevalent for the last two decades and worsened during the last two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, bringing the world closer to serious food shortages. The situation is particularly noticeable in the MENA region due to several other factors including conflicts, social constraints and norms, political instability and (misguided) policies.¹ Escalating food prices, lower food subsidies, food shortages, and undernourishment are all signs of the looming health and hunger crisis ahead.

The impact of the crisis in Ukraine has uncovered the fragility of food security in the MENA region. The recent FAO/WFP report on acute food insecurity in 20 “hunger hotspots” around the world² shows that people in Yemen and South Sudan are among those suffering from the highest levels of hunger. Among other factors affecting the situation are conflict and political instability, and the region’s position as the largest food importer in the world, with each country importing on average more than 50% of the calories it consumes. While Sudan and Syria are categorized as being of very high concern, Lebanon remains a hunger hotspot as it imports 80 per cent of its wheat, among other commodities, from Ukraine. Egypt is the largest buyer of wheat in the world, also with around 80 per cent of its wheat needs supplied from Ukraine and Russia. Tunisia and Libya both import nearly 50 per cent of their wheat needs from Russia, while Iraq imports around 88 per cent of its sunflower oil from Ukraine. The recent surge in food prices and inflation rate in the region has accentuated the food crisis and the future does not look any brighter.³

The effect of this multilayered food crisis is more pronounced for the most vulnerable: refugees, those living in areas of protracted conflicts, under occupation, and women – particularly rural women and children, though the urban female population is not much better off, particularly in crowded, polluted and conflict-ridden cities. Any solutions for the food crisis in the region must therefore take into account two major aspects: conflict and gender inequalities.

Conflict is driving MENA's food security problems



Source: UN World Food Programme.

Conflict, War, and Occupation

The Russian war in Ukraine has brought recent attention to the global food crisis, but for many countries in the MENA region conflict, displacement, occupation, sanctions, and war have for years been the biggest barrier to achieving sovereignty over their food systems and food security for their populations. The Middle East represents just 6% of the world's population yet is home to 20% of the world's food insecure people,⁴ due largely to the impact of protracted conflict. While some conflicts in the MENA region have roots in local populations' struggle for change, in many contexts interference from other countries has destabilized, exacerbated, and prolonged these conflicts.

The MENA is the world's most food import-dependent region, resulting in a food supply that is highly vulnerable to price fluctuations and supply chain disruptions. For those countries experiencing large-scale armed conflict, this vulnerability is significantly higher. Food prices, especially grain, vegetable oil, legumes, animal feed, and salt, rose rapidly between 2020 and 2022, caused by disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent war in Ukraine, and exacerbated by financial speculation. Because of the MENA region's proximity to Ukraine and Russia, grain from the Black Sea ports have long been a more affordable option for transport.⁵ Soaring inflation in countries like Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon has also resulted in a drastic decrease in purchasing power, pushing even more of those populations into a situation of food insecurity.⁶

Yemen

The seven-year war in Yemen is largely considered a proxy war between Saudi-led and Iran-led coalitions. Even prior to the onset of the war in Yemen, the country had high levels of food insecurity

amongst its population and was highly dependent on imports for food, as its own food production system was severely hampered by water scarcity, largely due to the widespread cultivation of *qat*.⁷ The situation deteriorated quickly with the onset of war, with famine conditions present in parts of the country since 2017. Currently, 19 million people in Yemen require food assistance – an increase of two million since 2019.⁸ Despite this rise in need, this year the WFP has had to cut food rations in Yemen⁹ due a combination of lack of funding to the country, global food price rises, and the impact of the war in Ukraine, as nearly half of Yemen’s wheat was imported from Ukraine and Russia in 2021.¹⁰ This means that five million people are now receiving less than half of their daily food requirements, while another eight million are receiving just a quarter of their daily needs.

Syria

After 11 years of war, Syria is still a conflict hotspot with little hope of resolution in the near future. The once-strong food system, which included near self-sufficient domestic crop production, is now decimated thanks to man-made and natural factors, including burning farmland as a war tactic, drought, and sanctions which makes it harder for farmers to obtain inputs.¹¹ Early in 2022, the UN reported that 12 million Syrians – more than 60% of the population – are now considered food insecure, which is more than at any other point during the war.¹² Despite this heightened need, UN agencies face an ongoing struggle to meet the humanitarian needs of people still in Syria. This has been exacerbated by diplomatic tension around the war in Ukraine given Russia’s military involvement in the Syria conflict since 2015, as this summer Russia was accused of plundering Ukraine’s grain reserves and sending it by ship to Syria.¹³

Palestine

Palestinians have been subjected to violence, dispossession of their land, and forced displacement since the creation of Israel in 1948. Those remaining in Palestine now live under military occupation, closure, and a system of apartheid in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel. These conditions have deeply affected Palestinian food sovereignty, creating vulnerabilities as opportunities to produce food locally and control trade are systematically obstructed. Under occupation, Palestinian farmers and fisherfolk are frequently targeted by illegal Israeli settlers and the Israeli army, who destroy crops,¹⁴ uproot trees,¹⁵ shoot at boats at sea,¹⁶ and block access to farmland and fishing waters. In the past 18 months, with Palestine’s food system already increasingly vulnerable to impacts of the pandemic and rising food prices, Israel conducted two full-scale military attacks on Gaza, in May 2021 and August 2022. The former resulted in destruction of and significant damage to land cover, crops, greenhouses, and other agricultural infrastructure.¹⁷ In this context, Palestine has also seen a dramatic rise in food prices over the past two years,¹⁸ prompting some countries to scale-up their support to Palestine via the World Food Programme (WFP).

Western Sahara

Western Sahara has been under military occupation by Morocco since 1975, and was prior to this colonized by Spain. The sovereignty of the Sahrawi people over the land, waters, and food system of Western Sahara has been obstructed by Moroccan settlement and industry in the territory. In 2019, Morocco exported €434 million of fish, tomatoes, and melons to Europe from Western Sahara¹⁹ in contravention of international law, which states that an occupying power cannot profit from the natural resources of a territory it occupies,²⁰ In a win for the Sahrawis, the General Court of the European Union struck down the trade and fisheries deals between the EU and Morocco in September 2021, arguing that

the deals were agreed upon without the consent of the people of Western Sahara. Spain, however, has chosen in 2022 to support the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara, ignoring the Sahrawis' legal rights to sovereignty, and continues to trade food and agricultural goods stolen from the territory.²¹ The occupation has displaced many Sahrawis who now reside in refugee camps on the Algerian side of the border. Like other communities displaced by occupation and conflict, high food prices have impacted the ability of humanitarian agencies to adequately respond to the needs of displaced Sahrawis, with WFP cutting its food rations to Sahrawi camps in Algeria by 50%.²²

Systemic Challenges and Solutions for Conflict Contexts in the MENA

While humanitarian responses to these contexts aim to support local communities that suffer from hunger, loss of access to land, and food insecurity, the lack of political will to halt these long-standing conflicts is the ultimate barrier that still needs to be addressed. A focus on meeting acute needs is not a long-term solution and should not come at the expense of communities achieving sovereignty over their own food systems. At the global level, states have not shown an interest in ensuring that the global food system functions in a way that reduces the vulnerabilities of communities experiencing conflict, occupation, and war, through measures that stabilize commodity prices, protect local food production, and provide fairer terms of trade.

Conflicts in the MENA region are also chronically underfunded by the international community, in stark contrast to outpouring of support toward the most recent war in Ukraine. This regionally selective allocation of funds contributes to the widespread hunger and food insecurity experienced by people in MENA region conflicts.

Reducing food system vulnerabilities of countries in conflict or at risk of conflict requires states and international organizations engaging with contexts of conflict to make transformative shifts in policy. Many of the needed changes are outlined in the CFS Framework for Action for Food Security and Nutrition in Protracted Crises (FFA),²³ and the CSIPM Report on Monitoring the Use and Application of the FFA.²⁴ Current examples in the MENA region underscore the need to:

- support local production and diversification of food trade in vulnerable countries
- end food price speculation and create fairer rules for food trade
- respect extraterritorial obligations of human rights by halting third country interference in wars, including the donation and sale of arms, which serves to imbalance and prolong conflicts
- include affected communities, especially small-scale food producers, in the design, implementation, and monitoring of policies and actions of humanitarian and development interventions
- act on the drivers of protracted conflict by exerting pressure on aggressors and occupying powers

Gender Perspective

“Overcoming gender inequality can play a key role in freeing the world from hunger and malnutrition,” QU Dongyuan Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), amid evidence that the food security gap between men and women has widened.²⁵

According to the recent report by the Special rapporteur on the Right to Food, women, whether in rural or urban context, are likely to be the first to go hungry, while also bearing the responsibility of feeding their families.²⁶ Throughout the MENA region, where roles and responsibilities associated with food security and nutrition largely fall on the shoulders of women and girls, and despite the key roles women play in food systems, female-headed households experience more severe financial burdens and themselves are the most susceptible to food insecurity, with a prevalence of malnutrition, including undernourishment and obesity (13.2% and 28%, respectively). Across the region, and particularly in countries affected by conflict, female-headed households, rural and refugee women, and women living with a disability are the most susceptible to food insecurity and the most likely to resort to negative coping mechanisms.²⁷

Moreover, there are specific issues related to the gender gap in the MENA region that makes the situation more dire. Women are more likely to be food insecure, with poorer perceived health and well-being compared to men, according to a study based on data from 18 Arab countries by the American University in Beirut.²⁸ Findings shed light on the gender disparities such as lack of women's engagement in the workforce, the gender pay gap, and unequal access to assets, resources and services, including education, healthcare and technology. Consequently, 43% of the study population felt they had experienced varying degrees of food insecurity in the years surveyed. Overall, women experienced higher levels of food insecurity (45%) compared to men (41%), except in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The food insecurity gender gap was largest in Mauritania, Somalia and Yemen. Elderly women are of special concern.²⁹

Women's Land Rights in Rural Areas

Peasant women who are the poorest, have less access to resources such as land ownership, shelter, water, education, loans, according to a recent report from the Middle East Institute.³⁰ The report notes that most of the MENA region's poor are in fact females who live in [rural](#) areas. In agrarian countries such as [Egypt](#) and [Morocco](#), poverty affects rural [females](#) more than males, while in [Sudan](#), poverty is over three times more common in rural areas than in urban ones. Poverty links very closely to food insecurity.

While agriculture is the main source of livelihood in many MENA countries, with millions of females working on agricultural land, women are mostly unpaid labor on family lands or hired labor on lands other than their own. They are informal workers or smallholder producers and often face discrimination in land and livestock ownership and in pay. In fact, land ownership is one of the main issues in the region. Women in the MENA region own only 5% of agricultural land but represent at least 40% of the agricultural workers Egypt: 5%, Morocco: 4.4%, Tunisia: 6.4% and Jordan: 3.4%.³¹ Land ownership not only secures income, food, and shelter, but also access to loans and other financial benefits.³² Landless women are unable to benefit from services, thus affecting their health, education and security, making them more vulnerable to the effects of crises, including pandemic, conflicts and climate change. Also the discrimination against females in land ownership rights prevents millions of women from positive life outcomes and makes them more vulnerable to exploitation, which ranges from dispossession, loss of dignified livelihood to human trafficking,³³ the victims of which are largely female.³⁴

It is important to note that land rights for females, children, minorities, and other potentially marginalized groups are supported by Islamic principles and state laws in most MENA countries. But in practice, female land ownership is limited and precarious. Deep-seated societal norms, illiteracy, and

unawareness of rights leads to loss of land or property to male relatives. Strengthening women's rights to land makes them prosperous, nourished, educated, safer, resilient, and healthy. Empowering half the economy with equal land rights would give a huge boost to the region overall.

Sexual and Gender-based Violence

Women and girls in rural and urban settings are subject to various forms and extents of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), reaching extremely dangerous and life-threatening levels. It is estimated that 35% of women and girls worldwide are subjected to one form of the other of SGBV,³⁵ while in the MENA region the rate reaches 90%. With hunger being a major cause of SGBV, the situation is further amplified with the "hurricane of hunger and a meltdown of the global food system" as a consequence of the Ukraine crisis.³⁶ As the economic situation in the MENA region has further deteriorated with the war in Ukraine, many have lost their jobs, their livelihoods and their food security. A consequence of this is the rise in prevalent incidents of different forms of SGBV, including increased levels of intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual violence, sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse, and child marriage.³⁷ In Lebanon, a country that has endured a complex economic and financial crisis coupled with conflict, climate issues, COVID and impacts of the Ukraine war as in many other MENA countries, the food crisis is affecting everyone, everywhere across the country, with women bearing the brunt of the profound impact of this multi-layered crisis according to the UN coordinator.³⁸

The burden carried by women is intensified during crises, as evidenced in the alarming rise in sexual exploitation, in inverse proportion to the country's "economic meltdown", according to a UN official, pointing to widespread reports of women and children "feeling unsafe in public spaces, such as streets, markets or when using public transport".³⁹ SGBV prevents women from accessing education institutions and workplaces, working on farms, accessing markets, using public transports and feeling safe in public spaces. It thus hinders their livelihoods and their sources of incomes leading to more poverty and food insecurity.

Women and girls Refugees and Migrants

The MENA region hosts a high number of refugees, migrants or displaced women and girls, who suffer from various forms of discrimination added upon the existing situations of injustice. Some of the most food insecure women in the region are displaced domestic workers. With the food crisis due to the Ukraine war, their food insecurity is severely threatened. Some of the higher economic classes in Arab states have replaced "unpaid" domestic work with house-workers, 90% of whom are women and many of whom are migrants or asylum seekers from neighboring countries. Employed to clean, cook, and take care of young children and aging residents, an estimated at 1.6 million domestic workers live in Arab states, representing around 19 per cent of domestic workers worldwide.⁴⁰ Their living and working conditions are in most cases less than optimal, making them vulnerable to employers who abuse their rights, putting house-workers, particularly migrants or refugees, in a state of deprivation, alienation and insecurity on many levels including and particularly in cases of crises.

The author has had firsthand experience with women refugees in Egypt at a training center, in the context of improving their nutrition and food security, and through a survey of 40 women, which showed that they will always prioritize their children and husband if there is a household shortage of food – this is almost always their norm. They also often go without food for the entire workday to keep whatever food they get for their families. Their food intake is also limited in variety and low in nutrition,

which is often because of their displacement and loss of pride in their food heritage and/or missing food items in their accommodating country.

Social protection

Rural as well urban women in the MENA region have difficulties accessing services such as health services (including reproductive, mental and preventive healthcare services) and social protection due to economic practices or social norms. Social coverage rates for women are often under half of those for men, with young women faring even worse: their labor force participation rate amounts to only 13.5%, while unemployment among young women stands at 49%. Women are mostly part of the informal economy whether as domestic workers, self-employed or housewives.⁴¹ With the rising poverty in the region due to the Ukraine war and even prior to it, the gender gap is increasing, as is the need for social protection to provide basic food needs and avoid staggering food insecurities.

Recommendations for Strengthening Women's Rights

In addition to the urgent action needed to support women's rights by addressing harmful gender norms, the immediate response to hunger and food crisis comes in the form of food aid, but is not in itself the solution. Below are some recommendations for strengthening the rights of women in the MENA region:

- Enforce women's inheritance rights, in collaboration with religious leaders and community patrons
- Create gender knowledge, including experiences, challenges and success stories, and share it among women in the region
- Protect all citizens' rights to secure land and other property ownership, including simplification of processes to benefit less educated and illiterate women
- Consult and involve women in the development and management of initiatives related to food aid and production, to cater for their needs around food choices, distribution, preparation, transportation, health and sanitation, as well as to address limitations
- Implement gender-adapted financial solutions and extension services, empowering women to manage their own resources and learn from each other⁴²
- Improve women's abilities through training, skills training, basic literacy, financial education negotiation and communication training, and couple such education and training with food aid and meal provision
- Enhance women's access to decent employment and create freely available workers' spaces that are safe, open and public
- Regulate the conditions of house-workers and the conduct of employers to eliminate cases and allegations of 'modern slavery'
- Expand cash transfer programs and increase semi-cash allowances under the food subsidy program and make these payable to women, to better target the poorest households

Conclusion

It is vital to consider the many underlying factors contributing to food insecurity in the MENA region, particularly when developing initiatives to pull people back from the brink of starvation, so that we create equitable and sustainable food systems and ultimately prevent future food crises. For some of

the MENA region’s most vulnerable communities – those living in conflict, and women and girls – a just and sustainable transformation of food systems is needed to halt the deterioration of their food-related human rights.

The impact of conflict on food security is well known, and its role as the “single greatest driver of hunger” has been acknowledged by the FAO.⁴³ Despite this, governments are not taking the necessary actions to end conflicts, nor are they willing to meet the humanitarian needs of communities facing hunger and famine situations through funding. In this context, it is necessary for affected communities to be given the power of decision-making for their own well-being. Humanitarian interventions and recovery programs must be based within a framework of food sovereignty.

We need to address existing social and economic barriers to women’s food security and nutrition by ensuring their equal entitlements, access to and control over assets, resources and services (financial and non-financial), and by enhancing their access to decent employment and social protection. Special attention should be dedicated to support women and girls in conflict-affected areas, women refugees, whose access to resources and services is particularly compromised. This change can only be attained through a move towards agroecology and food sovereignty, drawing upon the experience and knowledge of women.

Endnotes:

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