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- **Climate Refugees: A Major Challenge of International Community and Africa**

<https://www.policycenter.ma/index.php/publications/climate-refugees-major-challenge-international-community-and-africa>

## **Exploring the feminization of migration: Challenges faced by Moroccan agricultural workers locally and abroad.**

### **Abstract**

In the recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the feminization of migration from the MENA region. The drivers are diverse, ranging from economic prospects, to education, entrepreneurship, and family reunification. This shift has brought to the forefront a complex intersection of aspects related to labor, gender, and migration. By the present paper we suggest a comparative study covering two distinct settings – internal migrants in the agricultural sector of Souss Massa, and Moroccan migrant women working in Spain. The aim is to unveil the challenges faced by women in both domestic and international labor markets. Through the combination of complementary theoretical frameworks: The Social Role Theory and Intersectionality Theory, the study delves into the influence of societal norms and gender expectations on women experiences in the contexts of labor mobility. Additionally, the article seeks to explore the potential avenues for action to limit the instances of abuse that is faced by these women and empower them upon their return home.

### **Abstract in French**

La migration en provenance de la région MENA n'est plus limitée aux hommes, car de plus en plus de femmes arabes et africaines entreprennent cette aventure . Les motivations sont diverses, allant des perspectives économiques à l'éducation, en passant par les motifs de regroupement familial. Cette évolution a mis en évidence une intersection complexe d'aspects liés au travail, au genre et à la migration. Dans ce papier, nous proposons une étude comparative couvrant deux contextes distincts : les femmes migrantes en interne actives dans la région de Souss Massa et les migrantes marocaines travaillant en Espagne. L'objectif est de dévoiler les défis auxquels sont confrontées les femmes migrantes sur les marchés du travail nationaux et internationaux. Grâce à la combinaison de cadres théoriques complémentaires : La notion du rôle social et la théorie de l'intersectionnalité, l'étude examine l'influence des normes sociétales et des attentes liées au genre sur les expériences des femmes dans les contextes de mobilité du travail. En outre, l'article cherche à explorer les pistes d'action potentielles pour limiter les cas d'abus auxquels ces femmes sont confrontées et réfléchir à des initiatives visant à renforcer leur autonomie au retour.

## Introduction

The feminization of migration has not emerged as a concept until the 1980s, as research has for long been dominated by the assumption that mobility is a male phenomenon, building on the idea that migration is primarily driven by economic reasons. Men hence emerged as the economic agents of migration in contrast to women viewed rather as cultural, passive actors following their male partners in the migratory process. (Kachani, 2019). Yet, in terms of numbers, these assumptions only proved to be limited. In fact, as of mid 2020 female migrants were estimated at 135 million nearly half of the global migratory population (48,1%) with an increasing number of women migrating independently for work reasons and as households' heads (Migration Data Portal, 2024). As far as the MENA region is concerned, similar patterns are observed. Over the last few decades there has been an increasing feminization of mobility in the region, motivated by a multifaceted landscape of issues ranging from economic drivers to education, entrepreneurship, and family reunification. For the specific case of Morocco, three main phases in female emigration can be distinguished. A first phase that dates to 1960s and early 1970s, where very few women migrated mainly for family reasons. The second phase starting from mid-70s witnessed the departure of Moroccan women in the framework of family reunification in countries such as France, Spain, Belgium, and Italy. This process gave place to a timid, yet sustained insertion of Moroccan female migrants in the labor market of the host countries. Here again, an important share of the freshly arrived women remained confined to the culturally inherited gender division of labor (women taking care of the household and children while men work outside), while another share of Moroccan women entered the job market in the host countries as care providers and employees in other sectors of services, despite lacking the professional experience, either out of necessity or by influence of the models they saw in the host societies. The third and most recent phase started from the second half of 1980s, where women increasingly sought emigration to develop economic autonomy through targeted migration intended to pursue job opportunities.

With this relatively recent form of autonomous female emigration came an important share of challenges falling in intersection between three main areas that are labor, gender and migration. Through the presentation of a comparative analysis of migrant women working in two different contexts: internal migrant women working in the agricultural sector in the region of Souss Massa in the South of Morocco, and Moroccan migrant women working in Spain. The aim is to shed the light on the challenges and issues that they face as migrant workers both internally and abroad. Although their trajectories and motivations might be different, through the juxtaposition of the two case studies, it appears that discrimination and abuse are common gender-based patterns in the realm of women labor migration.

Beyond merely describing the struggles facing migrant women, this article seeks to explore the potential avenues for action to limit the instances of abuse that is faced by these women and think of initiatives to empower them upon their return home. The aim is to contribute to a better understanding of the complexities surrounding women participation in the workforce, through the combination of complementary theoretical frameworks: The Social Role Theory and Intersectionality Theory. The first consists of exploring how social expectations and norms play a significant role in influencing the behavior and opportunities available based on perceived gender roles, while the Intersectionality Theory adds the layer of social identities to the analysis, exploring how experiences and accessible opportunities are shaped by factors such as nationality, migratory status, and gender. A combined analysis consisting of the two framework is necessary to understand how women ended up forming most agricultural workers both locally and abroad and how gender affects the experience of these women as they navigate through the

migration journey. Furthermore, this paper - driven by a constructivist approach- unveils the findings of a field research mission conducted in the region of Souss-Massa which consisted of qualitative interviews with 40 women from different cities of Morocco settled in the region of Souss-Massa and working in the agricultural sector in Chtouka, who shared part of the struggles they face as women coming from unfavored social and economic backgrounds, hundreds kilometers away from their home cities.

### **The emergence of a precarious female workforce in rural centers in Morocco**

Historically, women in conservative regions of Morocco were primarily confined to household work although they have a longstanding culture of contributing to local agriculture for self-use. However, due to entrenched societal taboos and norms, the integration of women into paid agricultural work did not occur until the 1980s, (Pascon & Ennaji, 1986). Later, with societal modernization and women' access to labor market, it has become common to see women working in the agricultural sector, precisely in roles that do not require high qualifications, reflecting the increasing role that women play in the finances of the household. Moreover, women in rural areas proved to be more active than their fellow urban dwellers. In 2017, the activity rate for rural women reached 29.6%, compared to 18.4% for urban women and 22.4% for women at national level. Following this progressive shift in cultural norms and gender dynamics, occurred a subtle gender role division, as the work exercised by women in agriculture followed similar lines as their usual activities in the family contexts. Therefore, women were for long primarily tasked for weeding, harvesting, and storing food crops, as well as helping with sowing, transplanting, irrigation, pest control and soil fertilization (FAO).

Today, while the participation of rural women in paid agricultural work has become a commonplace occurrence, they continue to suffer from stigmatization, due to social images associated with women working in farms, partly because they belong to generally unfavored social and economic backgrounds and secondly because of the harassment and abuse practices in the sector that became widely known to the public. In fact, only a minority of female agricultural workers have formal contracts entitling them to social protection as the majority are operating within informal arrangements making them the weak link in the chain. Consequently, opportunities for career advancement for female workers remain significantly constrained compared to men. The latter often have at their advantage years of experience, gained through early access to the labor market, accelerating their ascendance to positions such as "cabran" (the overseer of laborers) or machine operators. Conversely, ways for women to get to such specialized roles are more difficult, with many being confined to toil on farms either as direct employees of farmers or through informal recruitment venues like the "moquef", where women gather daily to look for employment opportunities as early as 4am in the morning and If they are not selected by 7am, it means that they are unemployed for the day. The transportation conditions in which these women operate expose them to high risks of accidents because of overcrowded and ill-maintained vehicles.

### **A discrimination that is based on the intersection of various factors at play.**

in 1989 professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "Intersectionality theory" to emphasize how race, class, gender, and other characteristics intersect and overlap to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities, particularly within systems of power and oppression. To shed the light on some of the challenges faced by internal migrant women in Morocco, we chose to focus on the case of the region of Souss-Massa. In fact, the latter is nationally known as one of the most sought-after agricultural hubs that attract foreign investments since the independence

of Morocco, particularly in cities like Houara, Taroudant and the region of Chtouka where international farms established their business in tomatoes, citrus and orange. With this increase in investments came an increasing demand in the workforce, in farms but also in the newly installed factories where agricultural products are manufactured and prepared for export. This resulted into big waves of internal migration, both individually and collectively that have led to the development of different informal residential areas around farms.

In a field study conducted in the region of Souss Massa in March 2023<sup>1</sup>, it was striking to see how overlapping dimensions of discrimination interact to shape the experiences of women working in the agricultural sector in the region. The field study was based on a qualitative methodology through the designation of a random sample of agricultural workers in the tomato farms in the region of Chtouka Ait Baha. The initial intention was to interview 30 men and 20 women to evaluate the impact of climate change on the agricultural work in the region, as a part of a broader project intended to look at migratory flows that are induced by climate change in the region. However, as soon as we stepped into the farms the first striking observation was the higher numbers of women working in the farms in comparison with men. In most of the visited sites we found 70% women to 30% men ratio regarding the workforce. The final sample was hence comprised of 40 women and 10 men. The second observation was that more than 80% of the women we met were not originally from the region, as most of them originate from different cities and villages within the country. The study sample comprised individuals who had migrated from central areas to Agadir (Khniфра, Béni Mellal, El Gharb) due to various social factors such as divorce, non-traditional pregnancies, or a pursuit of autonomy. Therefore, the Souss region, notably Chtouka, gained recognition locally as a prominent center for unskilled agricultural labor, reflecting a pattern where women migrate to this area seeking employment opportunities in the agricultural sector.

The field study unveiled a complex system of discrimination and exploitation that is nourished by considerations relative to gender, class, and power dynamics. For instance, most women who were interviewed reported harassment and exploitation by male- Cabrans- during the hiring process, because of unequal power relations between the employee and the hiring authority. Most women reported decisions made by men employers based on personal preferences rather than merit considerations, which further exacerbate the vulnerability of women agricultural seasonal workers. Moreover, the observation that women outnumber men in the agricultural fields sheds light on the intersection of gender and labor dynamics in the particular case of agriculture work. When we interviewed farm owners about the fact that the labor force is dominated by women, they acknowledged that female workers are increasingly sought after, due to their perceived predisposition to endure harsh working conditions, assuming that women are more compliant and less likely to resist to unfavorable conditions. This intersectional analysis reveals how gender, labor dynamics, and power structures intersect to create a complex web of exploitation and vulnerability for women agricultural workers in the Souss region.

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<sup>1</sup> The field study was conducted by the author as part of the EU Migration Policy Group that is an initiative supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation Office in Madrid, that brings together liberal policymakers and experts to harmonize proposals and political action addressing migration issues and fostering dialogue on migration between the EU and its neighbors.

## **Discrimination against migrant women workers extended overseas.**

Data from the latest report on Moroccan International Migration published by the High Commission for Planning (HCP, 2019) revealed a growing trend towards the feminization of international migration, despite the historical predominance of men mobility. According to the data provided, current migration trends show a gender structure with a clear male predominance, as more than two thirds of current migrants (68.3%) are men, while the feminization rate is estimated at 31.7%, with a peak among youth aged 15 to 29 (38.4%) and lower rates among those aged over 60 (23.7%). This persisting gender disparity is largely due to the history of male emigration, that was prevalent until the mid-1970s, following a traditional roles' division inspired by the breadwinner model where men work and earn money while women are confined to household work. However, over the decades, there has been an increasing feminization of Moroccan migration abroad, initially through family reunification and increasingly through autonomous female migration.

Once again it is important to look at the phenomenon from a multidisciplinary perspective. Economists consider that the recent autonomous female emigration has fundamentally economic reasons; rooted in the crisis that hit the Moroccan economy from the late 1970s and led to dysfunctions that intensified from the early 1980s, fueled by the impact that have had the Structural Adjustments Programs, that proved to be financially beneficial but had advert effects on unemployment rates both among men and women (Khachani, 2019). The latter, mostly from poor backgrounds, with limited education and often natives of peri-urban areas found themselves on the look for paid jobs to financially support their households. In this context, sectors like services in urban cities and agriculture in rural areas raised as main options, because of the significant growth that these sectors have witnessed, providing a considerable supply of temporary, flexible and generally low-skilled jobs.

This shift observed in the patterns of female migration underline a significant change in Morocco's social and economic landscape, as women are increasingly active and contribute towards the expanses of the household. At the local level most Moroccan women in the rural areas are active in the agricultural sector (HCP, 2020). The analysis of the structure of employed women according to major occupational groups reveals that more than one third (36%) of women in the rural areas are active in the agricultural or fishing sectors.

As a result of the reputation of a hub for agricultural work, the region of Souss Massa started to attract the attention from international hiring agencies, with Spain playing a significant role as a favored destination for sourcing labor. In Southern Spain thousands of migrant women from Morocco are hired for the harvesting of red berries in Huelva and processing of horticultural produce within canning warehouses in Almeria, a tradition that finds its roots in the beginning of 2000s with Spanish farmers seeking to fill the labor shortage in the agricultural sector. Hence the Spanish authorities sought to develop this form of immigration that is regulated through international seasonal work contracts since 2001, known as "contratos en origen". These agreements allowed Spain to negotiate and sign contracts with labor-exporting countries through the pre-selection of workers directly in their home countries for the duration of the season (on average from 8 to 10 months), while ensuring mandatory return of these migrants once the contract reaches its end duration. This selective sorting policy is commonly referred to as circular mobility involving selecting, recruiting, transporting, placing, and repatriating the workforce based on the economic needs of both receiving and sending countries" (Mésini, 2009).

Once in their new place of work, Moroccan migrant women in Spain face almost similar challenges to the ones left home. Starting from lower wages than their counterparts, to instances of abuse and harassment that they face at regular basis. These women work in harsh conditions and are often subject to exploitation as most of their work is in seasonal positions, such as fruit picking, which are physically exhausting and lack job security. The fact that they have language barriers, illiteracy, and geographic isolation from their families further exacerbate their challenges, limiting ways available to them to advocate for their rights or access support services.

As far as the selection criteria are concerned, an ethical dilemma raises. In fact, women chosen to participate in the migration program must meet specific requirements: they must be mothers of young children and originate from rural areas. These criteria are designed to minimize the likelihood of visa overstay, as the women are expected to return to care for their children. They are hence perceived as less likely to have support networks that could facilitate their illegal stay in Spain. An official from ANAPEC (National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Skills) in the region -who wished to keep his identity anonymous- revealed that the selection criteria often extend beyond the matrimonial status restrictions to include physical and appearance considerations, with candidates being assessed based on the observation of the conditions of their hands to judge if they are familiar with agricultural work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Spanish recruitment agencies shifted to online selection processes, leading to a significant number of candidates originated from urban areas with intentions of settling permanently in Spain. Consequently, a decision was made to exclusively recruit from rural areas with the assistance of ANAPEC, which strives to uphold human rights and preserve the dignity of women during the hiring process, according to the same official.

The fact that women migrants are being selected mainly based on their marital status raise several concerns. In the Middle Eastern and Northern African societies, women have an essential role of childcare and home management, as these responsibilities are nurtured by cultural norms and societal expectations, shaping the gender dynamics within Moroccan households. Hence, women often manage the day-to-day care of children and ensure their well-being and upbringing, spending a considerable amount of time on unpaid care tasks. Hence, when Moroccan migrant women quit their houses for Spain, the entire family systems are perturbed. Interviews with social agents working for the account of the ANAPEC highlighted several impacts that women migration has on the households, including the decline in the performance of their children in school, the discovery of extramarital affairs of their partners and most importantly the fact that they are subject to financial exploitation, as many of these women send money to their husbands as counterpart for their caretaking duties during the period of the seasonal work. All these issues have a deep impact on the families particularly children and women. The ANAPEC source noted that only few of them manage to achieve economic independence and establish small businesses upon their return, emphasizing the key importance of supporting these women to break the cycle of vulnerability.

## **Conclusion and policy recommendations**

In both cases of internal and international Moroccan female migration, there is an intersection of vulnerabilities. In addition to the structural discriminations resulting from the nature of the work itself, the lives of immigrant workers are intersected by various axes of inequality, making them particularly vulnerable. These discriminations do not manifest simply as an addition of vulnerabilities from each axis of inequality - gender, migratory status, ethnicity, etc. - but rather converge and become mutually reinforced, leading to experiences of discrimination that are

holistic. In the case of migrant women in the agricultural sector three axes form the greatest influence on the experiences of these women: gender, origin, and class. In fact, the work of migrant women in the agricultural sector carries social stigma and is often associated with belonging to vulnerable socio-economic groups. Furthermore, women migrants working in agriculture navigate complex gender expectations that may conflict with traditional roles. They often find themselves assuming roles as providers for their families, hence challenging norms from their countries of origin. Balancing these responsibilities, especially in relation to motherhood, can lead to emotional and psychological strain as they strive to meet both work and family demands. In the workplace, these women are at heightened risk of gender-based violence and harassment, exacerbated by the lack of institutional support and awareness. In the case of workers in Spain, power dynamics within work settings are particularly challenging, especially for live-in workers or those in irregular administrative situations, can create environments where reporting abuse is difficult due to fear of repercussions such as loss of livelihood or deportation.

However, with this being said, we cannot deny the financial and potentially societal benefits of the economic migration of Moroccan women active in the agricultural sector, particularly the one who manage to make their way to Spain. In fact, despite the enumerated challenges that Moroccan agricultural workers face, when we interviewed local workers in the region of Souss, they said that they would still be eager to have the opportunity to go to Spain, simply because of the wage differences. While they are paid 70DH (eq of 6.5 euros) a day in Morocco, the average salary for Moroccan agricultural women in Spain, is approximately €7,63 hourly, which is almost eight times the pay in Morocco. It is also important to recall that for many migrant women, integration into the economic space is an opportunity to emancipate themselves and break free from the ties and constraints imposed by the traditional family. The income earned serves as a tool for them to achieve certain degree of autonomy and a goal to improve the standard of living for the family unit in the long term.

Hence, the solution to the raised issues is not to stop these kinds of arrangements that proved to be financially helpful to the beneficiaries' but rather suggest actions to improve the working conditions. This can be done through a variety of measures such as eradicating the criteria of selection that do not comply with human rights, such as the conditions of childcare and judgments based on the physical appearance of the potential migrants. improve the contractual clauses to account for the social and economic rights of migrants' women, including clear listing of expected duties and the salary equivalent to it. One source we met throughout the interviews in the region of Souss Massa confirmed that negotiations are ongoing to grant longer working permits for experienced migrant women, to ease the procedures of renewal, this initiative will undoubtedly be beneficial for these women and will allow them to better plan for their expected salary entries. Other venues of action can include setting up proximity services available to both local migrants in Morocco and Moroccan women in Spain to raise awareness about their rights and entitlement to support. Last, but not least, support and fund the activities run by different agencies such as ANAPEC to support, train, and fund small business for returning women to accelerate their financial autonomy.



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