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Lebanon: Using Female Agricultural Training Programs to Combat Food Insecurity

The history of Lebanon has been crowded with chaos. From civil wars, to political instability, to influxes of migrants entering its borders, the political climate of this country has often made it difficult for social, economic, and agricultural developments to occur. These slow developments have left Lebanon with weak infrastructure, and vast inequalities throughout various populations. Additionally these problems are further exacerbated by rampant food insecurity. Although the United States and other foreign aid agencies have tried to alleviate some of these problems with developmental assistance, this assistance is often ineffective and does not do enough to make find long term solutions to sustainable development.

Food security is a great concern in Lebanon. According to the United States Agency for International Development, “Around 300,000 people are unable to meet their basic food needs” (USAID). Additionally, Lebanon has the highest per capita concentration of refugees worldwide, and the additional influx of population puts a strain on food security for both citizens of Lebanon and refugees (Ghattas 1-10). This lack of development causes a slew of other problems, including gender inequality. Ironically, gender inequality is both heightened by and leads to further food insecurity as these issues are extremely interconnected.

According to the World Economic Forum, Lebanon is the eighth worst country in terms of gender inequality (World Economic Forum). Although the status of gender equality is improving, it still remains quite low in Lebanon. The literacy rates for women are significantly lower than their male counterparts, are constant victims of domestic violence and gender based violence, are less likely to participate in the workforce, and receive lower incomes as a result of labor discrimination (Zaatari). Additionally, a women are significantly at greater risk for poverty in Lebanon than their male counterparts (CUMERC 20). Women serve a very strong role in the agricultural sector as well. Comprehensive data and surveying is not updated frequently for the status of women in agriculture in Lebanon, but according to data from 1990, the percentage of those employed in the agricultural sector is approximately forty-one percent, but this has increased as men have abandoned the agricultural sector and moved to urban areas (FAO). Also, as bearers of children, the health of women directly impacts the health of the upcoming generations. In addition, because of societal and cultural norms, women in developing countries also serve a role of greater involvement in their families and the youth of their community compared to their male counterparts (Dimandja). Evidently, women serve powerful roles in their communities and the welfare of women directly impacts the welfare of all members of the nation. Therefore, the country of Lebanon must create an effective way to provide for its citizens and increase food security while reducing gender inequality. One of the most effective ways to do this is to provide female agricultural vocational skill training programs taught by and for women in local communities.

The average family size varies from about 3.9 to 4.9 people, and is usually comprised of two parental figures and their children (UNFPA). This is quite high compared to the global average, and population growth is a great barrier to achieving food security in Lebanon. The average diet of a rural family in Lebanon is centered around the crops that are grown on their farms, so they eat primarily wheat, fruits, vegetables, and olive based foods (Federation of International Trade Associations). While the majority of adults have attending some form of secondary education, as Lebanon has a 74.9 percent enrollment in secondary education, still a great number of adults have no secondary education (World Bank). The tertiary enrollment, however, is only approximately forty-six percent, so the majority of adults, especially in rural areas of the country have not received any form of tertiary education (World Bank). Although all

Lebanese citizens are allegedly eligible for a basic system of healthcare, the healthcare system in its reality is very unreliable in its coverage (Chen and Cammett 1-8). Additionally, research shows that “in practice, access to health services is used by political parties and politicians as a deliberate strategy to gain and reward political support from individuals and their families” (Chen and Cammett 1). Therefore, access to healthcare is proportional to participation in politics, and the majority of poor rural families don't have proper access to basic healthcare.

The average farm size for rural farm owners in Lebanon is approximately two acres, although this average can rise higher depending on the location: the average farm size for the Bekaa region is as high as seven acres (Sheehan and Abdul 80). Farms are usually owned by families who work to cultivate the crops, but unfortunately the income generated from agriculture is so small “the family income usually needs to be supplemented from another source” (Sheehan and Abdul 80). The majority of the crops grown by these rural families are wheat, barley, fruits, olives, and tobacco, and the herding of goats and sheep is common as well (Federation of International Trade Associations). Because of the general lack of education in rural regions of Lebanon, poor agricultural practices such as overgrazing, soil eroding farming, and deforestation (Asmar).

The greatest barrier to increasing the agricultural productivity and implementing more efficient, and environmentally conscious agricultural practices is lack of education for rural farm family farm owners (Asmar). Although farming is a fairly common practice in Lebanon, usually rural farmers do not have access to vocational training, nor do they have access to understand environmental sustainability and efficient farming. As a result, the agricultural practices used by the majority of farm owners are not only hazardous to the environment, but also don't produce efficiently enough to provide themselves a sustainable income, and must seek revenues of income outside of farming (Sheehan and Abdul 80). While lack of relevant education is a major barrier to earning living wages for families employed in the agricultural sector, there are many other barriers barring families all over the country from escaping poverty. Currently approximately twenty-nine percent of the total population are living in poverty (Kukrety 8). In rural areas, the poverty rate can get much higher, such as in northern Lebanon where the poverty rate is approximately fifty-three percent (IFAD).

One of the biggest barriers to escaping poverty is the stress on the economy because of the recent influxes of refugees (Kukrety 23-25). Because the population has increased much faster than the economy and labor market could adjust, there is much competition for jobs in Lebanon as well as competition for cheap housing and land, which makes it incredibly difficult to earn a sustainable living wage (Kukrety 9). Because the majority of the food in Lebanon must be imported from outside countries, food is often expensive which makes proper nutrition difficult for poorer families to achieve. Additionally, education systems in Lebanon do not emphasize nutrition, so comprehensive understanding of nutritional values are rare for rural and poor families (Habib-Mourad).

There are many issues facing the country of Lebanon which are brought on by instability, conflict, the influx of refugees, the lack of proper education, etc. As stated earlier, one of the most pressing and widespread issues brought on by these factors is gender inequality. In order to ensure human rights for all of the citizens of Lebanon, as well as provide greater access to food security and eliminate poverty, the government must implement a solution that would not only encourage women to encourage and thrive in the agricultural sector, but also create sustainable economic and societal development. The most effective way to do this, is to implement female agricultural vocational skill training programs taught by and for women in local communities.

These programs would occur in various communities and would be specific to that community. Because the nation of Lebanon has so much diversity in terms of topography, landscape, crops grown, etc., it would be improbable and inefficient to provide the same type of knowledge in all communities.

Therefore, the most effective way to conduct the programs would be to hire local women within the communities to teach. This grassroots approach would ensure that the women in the local communities are receiving knowledge and training specific to the climate and landscape of their own farms and would be better suited to manage and tend to their own farms. Additionally, hiring women to run these programs would be a positive way to employ women and increase their presence in the workforce.

Ideally, both the national government, local communities, and international organizations would be involved in organizing these programs. The national government would provide basic funding for the organization of this program, as well as providing an overall structure for the wide scale implementation. The national governments would then work with local communities to train, hire, and recruit local women to participate in these programs. International organizations would may help with the funding of this program as part of a developmental assistance budget. Additionally, organizations such as the United Nations would collect data and help to issue reports on the results of these programs to determine whether or not these programs should be implemented in other developing countries.

Studies show when women receive skill training, the frequency and quality of their employment opportunities increases (Gault). In addition, a review of a program conducted by the United Nations Development Program investigated the effects of a model workshop training for women in developing regions, and found that skill-building workshops, some of which were designed by local women themselves, led to increased empowerment and the rise of the status of women in these communities (Aksornkool).

These programs would not only be beneficial to women who are so marginalized in Lebanon, it would also significantly improve the welfare, economy and food security of the local communities and the nation as a whole. In developing countries, women invest ninety percent of their income back into their families and communities, whereas men only invest about thirty to forty percent of their income back into their communities (Borges 273). Therefore, when women receive the knowledge and training to increase their agricultural production and likewise make a greater income, it is statistically proven that they will invest that money back into their families and communities. This will lead to their children being able to live healthier and more productive lives, and it will circulate more money back into the local economy. This in turn will result in sustainable economic growth and stronger local economies as a result of women succeeding in the labor force.

Vocational skill training in particular has been proven throughout numerous studies to increase national development and boost the local economy and gross domestic product, especially in impoverished communities (Sharma 409-421; Liu and Chen 68-74). As stated by Mian Hussain in *The Pakistan Development Review*, "Skill excellence and human and human resource development has been acknowledged as the major component of economic and social development that contributes in direct proportion to poverty alleviation and national prosperity" (Hussain 1153). Not only would vocational skill training boost the national economy and development, focusing on women would alleviate gender inequality and boost economy as a result.

As stated before, farm owning families often generate so little income through agriculture on their farms that they must rely on alternate sources of income (Sheehan and Abdul 80). By ensuring that women are able to produce food more effectively and productively, the burden on the family to seek alternate sources of income. This would allow children to thrive in schools and create more sustainable lifestyles. The typical family would then be involved by having the adult female(s) of the family participate in the program, and supporting the agricultural practices she has learned through the vocational skill training program.

This proposal to implement a large scale national initiative to provide female vocational training programs in the agricultural sector is not purely hypothetical. Although this type of program has not been implemented on a wide scale, nor has it been implemented anywhere in Lebanon, case studies of similar programs indicate it would yield high success for both the women of the communities and the economy, welfare, and development of the communities themselves. For example, in Nigeria a similar program was conducted as a case study. The study found that vocational programs for women have been proven to reduce gender inequality, as well as significantly improve the economy of the community and improve overall welfare for the members of the community as well (Danjuma, Malami, and Gatawa 3961-3978). Another great problem facing the nation of Lebanon today is their growing population. Not only are they reproducing at a higher rate than most countries, they are taking in an influx of refugees which puts a strain on the national food security (Kukrety). However, using female agricultural training programs would help combat this population growth. Not only would agricultural production be greater, but studies indicate that when women receive education of any kind (traditional or vocational), they tend to have fewer children and have them later in life (Reading). According to the Earth Policy Institute, “If and when they do become mothers, they tend to be healthier and raise healthier children, who then also stay in school longer” (Reading). This in turn would lead to a smaller, yet more successful population.

Additionally, the nation of Lebanon requires extensive imports to meet the food demands of their population. According to Clemens Breisinger, senior research fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute, “about ninety percent of the food demands of Lebanon are met through imports” (qtd. in Alami). Since citizens of the local communities are relying on external sources to meet their food needs, this means less money is circulating within the local economies. Additionally, the costs of transportation from other countries equates to a higher food price for local residents. Providing vocational skill training programs on ideal agricultural practices would increase agricultural yield and food productivity, and would therefore require less imports to sustain the population of Lebanon. Not only would this circulate more money within the local community, but it would make food cheaper for the residents of Lebanon.

The issue of gender equality in Lebanon is incredibly interconnected with other issues nationally such as water scarcity and climate change. According to research published by the Columbia University Middle East Research Center, the Middle East is one of the most water scarce regions of the world, and “The communities expected to suffer most from stresses on water resources are the poor, particularly women and children” (CUMERC 6). The issue of water scarcity disproportionately affects women and girls as they are often the ones who are relied on to bring water requiring them to go to extra lengths to encounter this water. Additionally, climate change in Lebanon has often worsened the livelihood and incomes of those working in the agricultural sector, and has left many residents of Lebanon on poverty (CUMERC 22). Because women are significantly more likely to be impoverished in Lebanon, this is an issue that affects women and worsens gender inequality.

According to Charlayne Hunter-Gault, American journalist and former correspondent for National Public Radio, “women are hardest hit by poverty” (Hunter Gault). This is especially true in the nation of Lebanon. The troubles they are facing with food insecurity, poverty, population, etc. are only worse for the women of the country because of gender inequality; however, women also serve as a powerful solution to these problems. Because of the powerful roles they serve in their communities, women are one of the most untapped resources for change in developing communities.

As Lebanon is facing a slew of crises, particularly in regards to the recent migrants putting a strain on the existing population of the nation, it is essential that female empowerment be utilizing, particularly female agricultural training programs, in order to increase food security, control population, and create long term economic benefits and sustainable development. This empowerment program would alleviate gender inequality: a toxic effect of poverty which marginalizes the female population. By doing

empowering and training women in the workforce, the gender inequality for that nation decreases, indicating a better quality of life for women in that nation. This is one solution which effectively addressed two problems, gender inequality and slow development. Because of this, it is evident that investing in women isn't solely a moral obligation, it is an intelligent and strategic economic decision.

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