

Gendered Impacts of Environmental and Social Transformations in the Jordan Valley

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The Jordan Valley – a region covering about 1,600 square kilometers and constituting almost 30 percent of the West Bank – is one of the main agricultural areas in Palestine and has historically served as the main source of a wide range of crops used throughout the West Bank.¹ It is home to about sixty-five thousand Palestinians, who are scattered across thirty communities and some small villages.² Nearly 90 percent of the Jordan Valley is now classified as Area C, under full Israeli military control, as a result of the Oslo accords.³ Those areas classified as Area A or B, including the city of Jericho, are surrounded by lands designated Area C and are therefore isolated from one another. Israel forces Palestinians to stay within the boundaries of their communities and prohibits Palestinian construction in Area C, including housing, agricultural construction, public buildings, and infrastructure.⁴ Israel also prohibits Palestinians from using 85 percent of the land, limits their water resources, and reduces their access to healthcare and education.⁵

Women are the Jordan Valley's primary agricultural labor force and one of the most vulnerable groups in the population – though their conditions are not the focus of press or academic coverage of the region.⁶ Women typically work in agriculture to support their families and because other job opportunities are scarce.⁷ This prompted my engagement in a study of agricultural changes in the Jordan Valley, particularly after Oslo, and their effects on farming women's working and living situations.⁸ Two Jordan Valley communities, al-Jiftlik and al-Nu'ayma al-Dyuk, served

as the study's locations. These villages differ from one another in geographical, political, and social aspects, allowing comparison of various elements that might affect women who work in agriculture. The main difference is that Jiftlik is classified entirely as Area C, while part of Nu'ayma al-Dyuk is classified as Area A and the rest as Area C. Jiftlik residents and those in "C" areas of Nu'ayma al-Dyuk have poor infrastructure, insecure and unsanitary dwelling conditions, limited services, and difficult transportation, and live in constant fear of having their homes demolished. Residents of the "A" areas of Nu'ayma al-Dyuk have better infrastructure and housing conditions, as well as better access to better services.

Throughout the Jordan Valley, Israeli settlers have confiscated land and imposed increased restrictions on farmers, including on water access and marketing products, which have decreased Palestinian revenue from agriculture. To make up for these losses, some women were forced to seek employment outside of the family farms where they previously worked. Some moved with their families to other villages for work there during the agriculture season. Others began working in agriculture at the nearby Israeli settlements or on large farms owned by Palestinians.

Compared to local workers (those who stayed in their villages), migrant workers (those who moved to work in other communities) experienced more challenging living conditions. Local workers maintained more stable social relationships, better living conditions, and better housing conditions overall. Most migrant workers lived in tin-roofed quarters or tents on the farm with few social relations. One migrant woman told us: "I spend the whole agriculture season living with my husband and four kids in one room. My only dream is to have my own house."

At the same time, women who left family farms to work at nearby Israeli settlements had more interaction with the outside community and more financial independence. Women working with the family are typically unpaid for their work because it is considered part of their domestic chores. However, those employed in settlements endure a challenging, strenuous, and unforgiving work environment, lengthy workdays that last until late at night, and poor wages. They are generally paid per day, are denied vacations, and work throughout the year, even during the hottest months. As one woman who worked in a settlement said, "We used to work the whole year; any day that you don't show up [you] will not be paid." Another woman who worked in a settlement described the difficult physical conditions of the work: "I used to harvest green peppers in a very large [plot of] land. As you walk more, you would get farther from the place where you need to put the filled container. It was very heavy and we needed to fill it several times."

Women who work in agriculture to support their families financially have been particularly hard hit by the damage that Israeli policies have inflicted on Palestinian farmers' infrastructure and on their native environment, including water resources, homes, and farms. Due to challenging living conditions and inadequate infrastructure, many women find household responsibilities difficult and stressful. In many circumstances, they had to bring water for household use from outside tanks, and to cook outside the house. Women do all this difficult housework alone, in addition to

their major role in agriculture, putting more burden on them. One woman said of her husband: “We finish working together in the farm, and when we go home, I will start cooking and cleaning while he will lay down and start asking for stuff: sometimes coffee, or tea or something to eat.” Another spoke of inadequate rest and recovery after giving birth: “After giving birth, I used to go back to the farm directly – three days later – and bring my newborn baby with me.”

In farming families, many issues related to family structure persist, negatively affecting women. There was a distinct division of labor between men and women, with males preparing land for planting and transporting crops to market (which needs less effort) and women weeding and harvesting (which is physically intensive labor). Women also had a limited role in making decisions and managing the family’s income. Women had little economic independence since men controlled the family’s money and because women performed unpaid farm work as part of their domestic duties. Even women who earned money from jobs outside the family farm spent it all on improving family living conditions, leaving no money for their own needs. Very few women in the Jordan Valley have access to agricultural extension education or training.⁹ Families increasingly relied on women’s work to survive, whenever men were arrested or injured, increasing the workload on women who had to do both domestic and agricultural work, as well as men’s tasks. One woman described her situation: “When my sons were around, they did not allow me to carry the vegetable boxes. But now since they are all arrested, I have to carry them to the car.”

Agriculture in the Jordan Valley now faces extra threats due to environmental destruction and climate change, as the region has been hit hard by heat waves, droughts, land degradation, and water scarcity. These conditions, combined with political forces and economic insecurity within this context of restrictions and limitations, have affected farmers, causing some to adapt their work practices. Farmers began planting different crops, as those they had previously planted became less profitable and required more time and input to achieve yields. This has meant switching from cultivating vegetables to cultivating dates, which can withstand severe weather and require less fresh water. Farmers also began shifting the start of the agricultural season from September to October or November, when the weather begins to cool and the crops require less water. This has shortened the period of cultivation, reducing the economic benefit. Other farmers, unable to endure these circumstances, sold their agricultural land to investors, who used the land for other purposes, including construction for tourism and factories, changing the area’s former agricultural landscape.

The combination of challenging living and working conditions addressed here has also affected women’s health. Prolonged bending while harvesting and lifting large loads have caused musculoskeletal problems. Some women claimed to have allergies, asthma, and respiratory and skin conditions due to chemical exposure. Some suffered from dehydration and poor nutrition as a result of working long hours, even in extreme heat, with little access to food and drink. These conditions also have potential negative repercussions for the well-being of dependent families and children. The gendered experiences and impact of political and environmental changes in the Jordan

Valley on agricultural employment are significant issues affecting the well-being of agricultural workers. The changes and strategies necessary to improve the working conditions of women who work in agriculture should be the subject of more research, especially in environments with limited resources.

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Endnotes

- 1 MA'AN Development Center and Jordan Valley Popular Committees, *Eye on the Jordan Valley* (Ramallah: MA'AN, 2010).
- 2 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Preliminary Results of the Population, Housing, and Establishments Census 2017* (Ramallah: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018).
- 3 See United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Occupied Palestinian Territory, *Humanitarian Fact Sheet on the Jordan Valley and Dead Sea Area* (Jerusalem: OCHA, 2012), online at (ochaopt.org) bit.ly/3tmcglR (accessed 29 September 2023); and The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (B'Tselem), *The Jordan Valley* (2017), online at www.btselem.org/jordan_valley (accessed 20 August 2023). On the post-Oslo political, economic, and environmental transformations in the Jordan Valley, see Raja Khalidi, "The Structural Transformation of the Palestinian Economy after Oslo," in *From the River to the Sea: Palestine and Israel in the Shadow of Peace*, ed. Mandy Turner (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 95–124.
- 4 B'Tselem, *Jordan Valley*. See also Al-Haq, *Settling Area C: The Jordan Valley Exposed* (Ramallah: Al-Haq, 2018).
- 5 OCHA, *Humanitarian Fact Sheet on the Jordan Valley*; B'Tselem, *Jordan Valley*.
- 6 Fathi Srouji, *Enhancing the Role of Women in the Palestinian Agricultural Sector* (Ramallah: Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute [MAS], 2016).
- 7 Simel Esim and Eileen Kuttab, *Women's Informal Employment in Palestine: Securing a Livelihood against All Odds* (Economic Research Forum for the Arab Countries, 2002); Samia al-Botmeh, "Unlocking the Labor Market for Palestinian Women," al-Shabaka, the Palestinian policy network, July 2015.
- 8 The study was part of a research project of the Institute for Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, conducted in 2019 to 2021. It adopted a qualitative approach based on interviews conducted with thirty women, and two focus groups with twenty women. Participants were chosen using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Other members of the research team were Ahmed Heneiti, Suzan Mitwalli, and Dina Zidan.
- 9 Agricultural extension services are specially designed to provide agricultural workers with training in agronomic techniques and skills to improve productivity, food security, and livelihoods. These services are generally provided by governments; in Palestine, the PA Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for them.