

Women, irrigation and social norms in Egypt: “The more things change, the more they stay the same?”



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- Sources were explicit that **gender norms play a role** in how people are able to **access and control water** (e.g., how project coordinators understood and responded to women's concerns)
- **Gender norms** identified as the the **root cause** for why **women's engagements** with and contributions to irrigation are **ignored or undervalued**
- **Gender norms** are **subject to change**, constantly being reproduced, contested, and negotiated as part of everyday social interaction
- Lack of **sex-disaggregated data** on impacts of water policies and technologies

In Egypt women participate **actively in irrigation and water management**, however, their contributions are poorly understood and undervalued by land owners (typically men in their own families and communities) as well as by irrigation engineers and extension agents, as such we aim to:

- **Identify and describe women's contributions** to the irrigation sector; **understand how norms** determine that and are **changed** through time
- Make **recommendations** for improving women's **access to irrigation technologies** and **participation in water governance**

Methods (inspired by Gennovate)

- **Survey** administered to 402 farmers (202 women and 200 men) in the Old and New Lands of Egypt (Kafr Sheikh and Noubariya)
- **Unstructured interviews** (150) with men and women farmers, their families, irrigation officials as well as **participant observation** between 2014-2016.
- The **two sites differ significantly** in gender norms, levels of economic development and biophysical dynamics (land ownership, education, extent of development agencies involvement, training, labour availability, agricultural system)



Irrigation Roles and Norms: Disruptions, Contradictions and Continuities

Social **norms that regulate women's decorum, propriety and mobility** as well as the **perceived need for physical strength** to carry out irrigation activities were frequently cited as the reasons for women's inability or unwillingness to participate in irrigation.

"Women cannot irrigate because irrigation comes in *monawba* [rotations]. If the water comes at 2 am, how would a woman go?"

"How can a woman possibly irrigate? It would require her to roll up her clothes."



- **87 percent** of respondents in Kafr Sheikh (**Old Lands**) reported that **women participate in irrigation activities** on their families' lands and **6.5 percent** believed that women and men contributed **equally** to irrigation on family farms.
- **68.8 percent** of respondents in Noubariya (**New Lands**) reported that **women participate in irrigation** on their farms and **2.5 percent** believed that women and men contributed **equally** to irrigation on their own farms.

Differed between the two regions due to different **educational backgrounds, institutional support, land status and training:**

“For sure there is no man in the house, for a woman to irrigate or clean a drain, she is obliged,” explained a water engineer in KFS .

“I irrigate at night. I irrigate anytime. There are no jobs. I have to rent land. I have to teach my children,” explained a widowed female farmer in KFS.

“Our women are educated. Our women here are trained on how to irrigate.” explained a village engineer in Noubariya.

“We got the training: we know which irrigation technique to use on what. Trees require drip and field crops require sprinklers. We know that we have to stop irrigating the trees before they flower. We know which pesticide works on which disease, aphids, mildew,” explained two women landholders in Noubariya.

Irrigation Technologies: Adoption and Impacts

- Male and female landholders **ranked irrigation as the most important innovation** introduced in the Old and New Lands in the past ten years but **fewer women farmers adopted** improved irrigation technologies.

“By pressing a button, you irrigate the land.”

“Now life is much easier, we used to carry those heavy aluminum rods to irrigate and we also had to move the sprinklers. Now there is drip and fixed sprinklers for irrigating the land. This has made irrigation far less difficult,” explained a woman landholder.

- New technologies not only **reduced drudgery** but **afforded women greater visibility**.



Participation in Water Users' Associations

- Survey findings indicative of how **low the participation of women is on WUAs**.
 - Members were predominantly **affluent men**
 - Women marginalized as a consequence of their **lack of education and low status**
- Due to **donor agenda**, women in the Old Lands represented domestic water users and in the New Lands represented irrigation water users
- Notable case of **women landholders in the New Lands** (received training, pumps, donor support)
- Both women and men **lost interest in WUAs** upon losing development agencies' support, especially so after the Revolution of 2011.



- Women are **far more actively engaged in irrigation** efforts in Egypt than is generally assumed and documented in the literature on the topic.
- Although women's invisibility in irrigation may be a consequence of their lower status and association with the domestic sphere (as in the Old Lands in Egypt), it is more often a consequence of **the continuing association of irrigation with masculinity**.
- **Land ownership for women**, especially when **supported** by higher levels of **educational attainment, training in irrigation technologies, and institutional support** for participating in local governance institutions, such as WUAs, appears to **optimize** women's participation in irrigation management and adoption of irrigation technologies.
- In the **absence of wider political awareness** among women and men about the value to society of greater gender equity, **women's optimal participation** in irrigation, and in social, economic and political realms more generally, **can only be partially fulfilled through legal measures and policy interventions**.