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# EMPOWERING THE SILENT SENTRIES: RURAL WOMEN AT THE FRONTLINES OF CLIMATE JUSTICE

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“Navigating Climate Change and environmental activism in the MENA region: Challenges and Opportunities”.

Roundtable discussion Organized on September 21st 2023 at the Asfari Institute Conference Hall in AUB.

The series is co-designed with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, the AUB-Asfari Institute for Civil Society & Citizenship, Arab Reform Initiative and the AUB-Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.

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## PANEL:

**Erica Accari**

Co-founder and manager of [Turba Farm](#)

**Amani Beainy**

Legal Researcher and co-founder of the Save Bisri campaign

**Cynthia Chidiac**

Senior researcher at [Asfari Institute for Civil Society & Citizenship](#) (moderator)

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## BACKGROUND

Worldwide, women make up [half of the agricultural workforce](#). In Lebanon, rural women stand as unwavering pillars of nature conservation and climate action. Yet, despite their central role, rural women often find themselves at the margins of socio-political dialogues, having to face systemic challenges and patriarchal laws that overshadow their contributions to the preservation of the natural heritage.

The intersection of gender and climate justice in Lebanon is inherently complex, intertwined with socio-cultural norms, economic dependencies and the pressing realities of politics. With the unprecedented impacts of climate change, women, deeply rooted in farming, food processing, and artisanal crafts, find themselves at the forefront, navigating these changing landscapes and adapting to extreme weather events, decreased agricultural outputs, water scarcity, and land degradation.

Climate change induces gender-differentiated impacts in rural areas, as it affects women and men disproportionately in terms of vulnerability, ability to respond and capacity to adapt. This demographic challenge highly depends on an individuals' access to resources, assets, information, services, opportunities and decision-making power. Given their marginalization, women are generally more vulnerable to climate change and tend to have [a harder time bouncing back](#) from disasters.

In the face of such injustice, one cannot but wonder how to secure decent lives to all genders without discrimination, how to make sure rural areas prosper without leaving anyone behind and how to recognize the true value of rural women especially in the context of climate change?

## SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

The panel discussion shed light on the daily injustices and intersectional challenges faced by rural women in the context of climate change. By intertwining the stories of two young voices from the field, the discussion provided insights on how to influence national policies and initiatives, ensuring that the complex challenges of gender and climate justice receive the attention they warrant in Lebanon's evolving narrative.

Ms. Erica Accari started the discussion by sharing insights from her inspiring journey in co-founding 'Turba Farm'. The latter is a local organic agricultural farm, where permaculture techniques are used to produce vegetables from heirloom seeds, including the 5000 year old 'Salamouni' wheat variety. Ms. Accari emphasized the need to preserve heirloom seeds as they are generally more resilient and adapted to the local climate than genetically modified seeds.

Through her experience as a young rural farmer, Ms. Accari highlighted the main challenges faced by women in agriculture, indicating that those encompass climate change to also include food security and sovereignty, fair trade, farmer autonomy and human health.

A critical challenge that both panelists underlined is the infamous Litani river pollution, exacerbated by ongoing mismanagement. Farmers in the surrounding fields are using polluted water to irrigate their crops, further worsening the risks of chronic and acute health problems among consumers. This situation raises alarming questions on whether farmers should sacrifice consumer health over their own economic returns.

## MISMANAGEMENT OF THE LITANI

As sewage pipes remain without filters, municipal and industrial wastewater feeds directly into the Litani stream. Water in the latter is consequently full of carcinogens, bacteria and harmful organisms that affect both nature and human health.

[LARI Pollution Report 2019](#) shows that 71% of tested water from the Litani river fails to meet quality standards.

An [EU-funded project](#) in 2013 estimates the water resource degradation in the Litani to cost 227 million USD per year.

Building on that, Ms. Beainy discussed the impact of inherited patriarchy and sectarianism on women's rights, with a focus on gender inequalities in the environmental field. For reference, Ms. Beainy highlighted major gaps in environmental laws that discriminate women, limiting their rights of ownership, equal pay, access to opportunities and consequently independence and power.

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Worldwide women's rights to land ownership significantly lack, diminishing their resilience to climate risks. According to FAO's Gender and Land Rights Database, less than 15% of agricultural land is held by women worldwide and less than 4.9% in the MENA region.

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Ms. Beainy also spoke about female activists who bravely stood at the frontlines in the Save Bisri Campaign and played a major role in its success. According to Ms. Beainy, women were the first to raise awareness about the Bisri valley, they were the first to break the barriers to organize a mass protest on site, and they were the first to launch petitions against the dam.

A special emphasis was put on the power of collective action, interdisciplinary dialogue and grassroot initiatives. The roundtable discussion ended with a set of guidelines that direct policy interventions, forge collaborations and ultimately empower the silent sentries at the frontlines of climate justice.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS



### INTERSECTIONAL CHALLENGES FACED BY RURAL WOMEN

Rural women face specific challenges on a daily basis, including issues related to access to resources and economic opportunities, and these challenges are exacerbated by climate change. Similarly, women who shift from farming to pantry production equally suffer from lack of autonomy as they cannot own the lands that produce their primary material.

With high levels of uncertainty, and little to no control over climatic conditions, farmers are among the most vulnerable to climate change. These challenges are further exacerbated when it comes to female farmers who have diminished rights, bulky workload, unequal pay and lack of security. The multi-layered challenges that women in agriculture face must be broken down and addressed individually to secure a safe and just sector for all genders.



### ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF PATRIARCHY AND SECTARIANISM

The discussion delved into the profound environmental implications stemming from the pervasive issues of patriarchy and sectarianism, particularly in the realm of women's rights. The intersectionality of gender and environmental challenges was underscored, revealing the interconnected nature of these systemic problems. Patriarchy, with its entrenched power structures, often exacerbates environmental degradation by limiting women's agency in decision-making processes related to natural resource management and conservation. Simultaneously, sectarianism can further amplify gender inequalities, as discriminatory practices may disproportionately affect women's access to environmental resources and opportunities. This nuanced exploration underscores the critical necessity for a comprehensive and integrated approach to confront these challenges.

The call for reform extends beyond environmental advocacy alone, necessitating a reevaluation and restructuring of laws and policies to eradicate gender disparities within the environmental context. By addressing the root causes embedded in patriarchal and sectarian systems, there is an opportunity to create more inclusive, equitable, and environmentally sustainable frameworks. Ms. Beainy's discourse thus highlights the imperative for a holistic strategy that not only recognizes the environmental impact of patriarchal and sectarian structures but also actively works towards dismantling these systems to foster a more just and sustainable future for all.



### WOMEN'S ROLE IN ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

The recognition of women's pivotal role in environmental activism was prominently emphasized by the panelists during the discussion. A poignant example that resonated throughout the discourse was the Save Bisri Campaign. The campaign not only symbolizes the remarkable agency of women but also serves as a compelling illustration of their proactive engagement in catalyzing positive change. Women have been at the forefront, breaking traditional barriers, and assuming leadership roles within environmental activism.

The Save Bisri Campaign, with its emphasis on preserving natural resources and fostering sustainable practices, underscores the indomitable spirit of women in confronting environmental challenges. Their contribution goes beyond mere participation; it is a demonstration of leadership, resilience, and a commitment to shaping a more sustainable and equitable future. By acknowledging and celebrating the active involvement of women in initiatives like the Save Bisri Campaign, the panelists shed light on the transformative power that women wield in driving environmental advocacy and inspiring communities to prioritize the protection of our shared planet.



### POWER OF COLLECTIVE ACTION AND GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES

Cooperation between activists, grassroots initiatives and international organizations is essential to unify advocacy campaigns. By rallying communities around a shared message and nurturing their sense of eco-feminism and environmental stewardship, they will be empowered to achieve a greater impact.

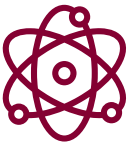
Every actor has a specific role to play using different tools in advocating for change. International organizations are essential in linking the local work to a larger impact on a regional level. Research and academic institutes provide scientific evidence to debunk any misinformation. However, the main role remains in the hands of grassroots movements and local activists that lead any action on the ground.



### **ADDRESSING THE THREAT OF MISMANAGEMENT**

Environmental degradation, food scarcity, climate change among other challenges are exacerbated by mismanagement and disproportionately affect people. In order to secure a better future for the most vulnerable communities, radical law enforcement would be required. Projects must be backed up with adequate policies that hold managers accountable and impose sanctions on those who do not abide by the rules.

Moreover, project management mechanisms must ensure ecosystem safety, economic stability and low impact on people of all genders. Environmental projects are riddled with managerial loopholes, that cause further deterioration to nature and lead to socio-economic damage. It is necessary to activate oversight mechanisms that avoid ineffective responses in projects and ensure their long-term sustainability.



### **FIGHTING SCIENTIFIC CORRUPTION**

Non-factual and misleading information need to be debunked by experts and justified with scientific evidence. Recent cases show that project beneficiaries can publish and disseminate inaccurate research to discredit the truth and label projects as “eco-friendly”. These projects end up serving personal interests over collective welfare.

Scientific data should be reviewed firsthand to validate its authenticity before making rational decisions and implementing projects. As more research is being used to blur real facts and incorrectly document Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), more collective work needs to be done to dehaze research and debunk sources that misinform donors and the community.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS & WAY FORWARD**

The roundtable provided insights on the daily struggles faced by rural women and the important role they lead in climate action. Empowering the silent sentries at the frontlines of climate change requires concerted efforts in fighting corruption, being vocal and ensuring good management of any project before its implementation.

Considering the key messages highlighted during the panel discussion, the following steps can set the path for a shift towards a more gender and climate just future:



### **PROMOTING GENDER-INCLUSIVE CLIMATE POLICIES**

Developing and implementing climate policies that explicitly address the distinct challenges faced by rural women is imperative for fostering gender equality, social justice, and sustainable development. Rural women often play pivotal roles in agriculture and water management, making their empowerment central to building community resilience. Tailoring climate policies to their circumstances ensures effective resource allocation, promotes sustainable agricultural practices, and enhances food security.

By recognizing and incorporating the specific needs and experiences of women in rural settings, these policies contribute to a more equitable distribution of the impacts and benefits of climate action. Meaningful and active participation of rural women in decision-making processes related to climate action is of central importance. By ensuring their voices are heard and valued, policies can be crafted with a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities these women encounter. This collaborative approach fosters a more inclusive and effective response to climate change.



### **SUPPORTING AND PROTECTING WOMEN ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS**

Environmental activism can be perilous, especially for women activists who tend to face various forms of harassment, intimidation, and even violence. Creating a supportive environment involves not only recognizing these risks but also actively implementing measures to ensure the safety and well-being of women activists who are at the forefront. This includes legal protections, mechanisms for reporting and addressing threats, and international advocacy to raise awareness about the importance of safeguarding environmental defenders.

Encouraging and facilitating the active participation of women activists in decision-making processes related to environmental conservation is critical for effective and inclusive policymaking. The inclusion of women voices in decision-making ensures that policies are reflective of the needs and concerns of entire communities, contributing to the creation of more gender-sensitive, equitable, and impactful environmental conservation strategies.



### **ADVANCING LEGISLATIVE REFORMS TO ADDRESS GENDER INEQUALITIES**

Advocating for legal reforms that specifically target gender inequalities in the environmental and agricultural sectors is of paramount importance because addressing these disparities is a fundamental step toward achieving gender equality. By advocating for reforms that ensure women's rights to land ownership, equal pay, and access to opportunities, the legal framework can serve as a powerful tool to dismantle longstanding barriers that have perpetuated gender-based discrimination in these critical sectors.

Cooperation between different governmental and non-governmental actors is necessary to improve both human and environmental conditions through the law. A key starting point is targeted advocacy for law enforcement, especially of laws that fall at the nexus between gender equality and climate justice. Involving communities in the legislative framework is crucial. This can be achieved through media campaigns and group discussions that shed light on the shortcomings in Lebanese laws, motivating individuals to participate actively. Moreover, collaborative monitoring and evaluation mechanisms can bolster women's support and empowerment by holding those who violate their rights accountable.



### **FORGING ALLIANCES TO EMPOWER WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE**

Fostering alliances is essential to elevate the autonomy of women in the farming community, providing them with a collective voice for negotiations with decision-makers. Specifically designed networks for female farmers become crucial avenues for advocating targeted rights, including equitable land ownership, fair compensation, and increased access to opportunities.

The establishment of cooperatives is a key strategy to empower women farmers by creating spaces to share best practices, expertise, and resources, ensuring collective access to diverse markets. Introducing seed banks is particularly significant for women in agriculture, enabling them to cultivate crops safely, preserve ancestral farming methods, and safeguard natural heritage. To promote gender-sensitive permaculture practices, these seed banks should offer heirloom seeds at reduced costs, fostering competitiveness against conventional mass agriculture and motivating women farmers to invest in sustainable approaches.



### **INTEGRATING INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH, DATA, AND EDUCATION FOR INFORMED ACTION**

Investing in interdisciplinary research and comprehensive data collection is indispensable for understanding and addressing the intricate challenges faced by rural women. This approach integrates insights from various disciplines, allowing for a nuanced examination of the intersectional factors influencing the lives of rural women. Simultaneously, leveraging research and education emerges as pivotal in raising awareness among citizens and fostering sustainable development. Research provides the foundation for evidence-based projects that prioritize the well-being of both nature and people, seeking a balanced approach to meet their needs. On the other hand, education becomes a transformative tool, catalyzing behavioral change and turning citizens into environmental stewards.

When communities are environmentally aware, they can distinguish between misleading information and authentic scientific facts, enabling them to assess the potential harm of projects. This heightened awareness equips communities to combat mismanagement effectively. By integrating these strategies, societies can develop targeted interventions and evidence-based policies that not only address the specific needs of rural women but also contribute to the broader goal of fostering sustainable, inclusive, and equitable development.



### **STRENGTHENING LAW ENFORCEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES**

To fortify law enforcement and accountability measures, it is imperative to institute robust legal frameworks designed to combat mismanagement in environmental projects. These frameworks must articulate clear guidelines, set deadlines, and delineate consequences for non-compliance. The establishment of an independent oversight body is also crucial, tasked with the responsibility of vigilant monitoring and evaluation of environmental projects. This oversight body ensures strict adherence to established policies by project managers, creating a checks-and-balances system.

To further enforce accountability, the introduction of sanctions is recommended for individuals or organizations found guilty of mismanagement. These sanctions may encompass fines, project suspensions, or legal actions, serving as potent deterrents against negligence and reinforcing a commitment to responsible environmental stewardship.



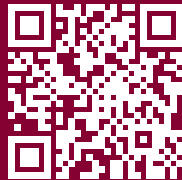
### **PROMOTING SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY AND PUBLIC AWARENESS**

To bolster scientific integrity and enhance public awareness, multifaceted initiatives are essential. Launching targeted public awareness campaigns represents a key strategy, aiming to educate communities on the critical significance of relying on scientifically validated information. Concurrently, fostering a culture of ethical standards among scientists and researchers is paramount. Encouraging adherence to ethical guidelines promotes integrity in their work, discouraging the dissemination of inaccurate data that may compromise the reliability of scientific findings.

Additionally, it is imperative to establish a robust mechanism for reporting and addressing instances of scientific corruption. This mechanism not only serves to rectify any ethical breaches promptly but also contributes to fostering a culture of accountability within the scientific community, ensuring that rigorous standards are upheld to maintain the credibility of scientific research and its applications.



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