

7. Climate Action

by Gabriella Nassif



Introduction

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development/OECD (2021), gender lies at the heart of the climate crisis and the nine environment-related SDGs. A growing body of evidence places women and other marginalized groups at the nexus of gender inequality and the climate crisis and highlights the disproportionate impact of climate crises—like floods, rising sea levels, rising temperatures, sustained periods of drought, and more—on these communities. Already disadvantaged by their gender identities, various environmental crises only make it harder for women and marginalized groups to access resources to protect themselves and their families. Today, the UN estimates that approximately 80% of people displaced by climate change are women (United Nations High Commission for Refugees/UNHCR, 2022). Women are also

overrepresented in climate-vulnerable sectors, often characterized by low pay, low status, and job insecurity (Deininger et al., 2023). When climate disasters or change strike these sectors, women, who are often the most vulnerable, face heightened impact and are at greater risk of losing any security these jobs may have provided. Additionally, their inequitable social positions make it challenging for them to adapt to environmental changes. Furthermore, evidence suggests that climate change and environmental degradation exacerbate rates of violence against women and girls (VAWG). These changes add additional stressors to families and communities (UNHCR).

In the MENA region, women and marginalized groups are similarly at the core of the climate-gender nexus. In places like Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, for example, UN Women reports that climate “extremes such as drought



Figure 1. Relation among targets of Climate Action and the SDGs (OECD, 2021)

or flooding, combined with gendered expectations of women's increased care responsibilities, have resulted in greater displacement, increased gender-based violence, increased human trafficking, and death among women and girls" (Hassan et al., 2021). Women in the region are disproportionately represented in informal and insecure economic sectors, making their livelihoods and security the first to be impacted by climate crises like droughts and declining harvest yields as a result of increasing global temperatures (World Bank, 2023). Water scarcity is a particular concern for the region, with UN Women highlighting that women are "especially vulnerable" to water scarcity

"as they are primarily responsible for water collection and management in the household" (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia/UNESCWA, 2022). Moreover, land ownership and increasing privatization have negatively affected women and other marginalized groups' access to natural resources (Daibes, 2023). In Yemen, for instance, where climate change has forced many men to migrate to the cities for better work opportunities, women are left to oversee homesteads even though cultural and legal barriers severely restrict women's property rights. This exposes them to violence and exploitation and makes it

even more difficult for women to ensure the survival of their families (UNESCWA, 2022, p.4). In Egypt, women in rural areas are experiencing similar stressors, owning only 5.2% of agricultural land in the country even though they represent approximately 45% of agricultural workers (UN Women Egypt, 2023).

In the MENA region, women are not just victims of climate change but also “effective actors or agents of change in relation to both mitigation and adaptation” (UN Women Watch, 2009). Women “have a strong body of knowledge and expertise that can be used in climate change mitigation, disaster reduction, and adaption strategies” (UN Women Watch, p. 1). In Libya, for example, a UN Women report commemorating International Women’s Day 2022 recognized the growing interest of Libyan women in climate change following the Paris Agreement in 2021. It reported that, despite traditional practices and patriarchal beliefs often serving as barriers to their participation, Libyan women are actively challenging these norms and to contribute to climate action (Saadeh, 2022). Across the region, similar barriers—namely patriarchal practices and gender inequitable beliefs—prevent women and girls from participating directly in climate action (UNESCWA, 2023). This reflects the global experiences of Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders, who are “at a particular risk of threats, violence, and even femicide as they take action to protect their territories, ecosystems and communities from the impacts of human-led habitat loss, degradation, pollution, and climate change” (UN Women, 2022).

Nevertheless, the MENA region is taking steps toward mainstreaming women’s insights and experiences of climate change into climate action strategies and plans. Recognizing these barriers, some Arab States—including Jordan, Palestine, Sudan, and Kuwait—are actively incorporating gender concerns into their national adaptation plans on climate change. National adaptation plans on climate change were established under the Cancun Adaptation Framework as part of the global United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Under the CEDAW, States are also beginning to address the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and girls, recognizing it as a critical component of gender inequity across the region (UN Women, 2023). Collaborating with various UN and international agencies, these States are exploring the gender-climate nexus. Several key reports in recent years have underscored the relationship between gender and climate change, emphasizing the role of women in the Arab region in bolstering resilience to climate change (UN Women, 2023). In their report on feminist movements and engagements with climate issues in the region, Kvinna till Kvinna interviewed 22 women’s rights activists and feminists about their understanding of climate change. The report reflected a growing interest in climate justice among women’s rights and feminist actors and organizations in the region, and their eagerness to explore the ways that climate justice and gender justice are intertwined (Kobaissy & Daou, 2022). This surge of interest is reflected by the rising number of women-led climate action initiatives in the region,

as well as webinars, conferences, and informal discussions about women's roles in climate action.

In this context, the AiW has organized several events focusing on the gender-climate nexus in the MENA region. In 2022, in partnership with UNESCWA, the AiW hosted the seventh annual arts competition for 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence Campaign under the theme of "Environmental Equality in the Arab Region" (Arab Institute for Women, 2022). The competition received almost 100 different entries from countries around the region, including Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Morocco, and Turkey, spanning various artistic mediums.

In the general competition, which was regional, the poem of Pia Kmeid from Lebanon, The Drought was awarded first place. A second competition was held amongst Graphic Design students from the LAU who met with staff from the Institute and UNESCWA to learn about the gendered impact of climate change and its relationship to gender inequality and VAWG. From these discussions, students were asked to design cards with messages from and images of climate activists from the region that were then launched throughout the 16 Days Campaign. From this engagement, Lin Habbal and Reem Abdallah's designs were awarded first place, as well as shared online in the international campaign (Figures 2-7).

The AiW celebrated the winners of the competition with a panel discussion on climate change, featuring Lebanese environmental activists Amani Beaini, Joslin Kehdy, the founder and director of

Recycle Lebanon, and Noura Abdo, the founder of Our Climate Egypt.

In 2023, the AiW hosted another webinar titled "Gender and the Environment," targeting students from LAU and across the region. The event brought together women environmental activists from various parts of the region, including Nisreen El Saim, a climate change activist from Sudan, and Hiba and Rouba Farhat, members of the Nidaa' El Ard Association.



The Drought

To the field he left
Looking for some wheat for bread
For his girls to be fed

No grain, no plant was spared
At the sight of land, dread
Dry tears he wept
Resorted to whom matched his soul,
Mother of four,
As a sacrifice in this war
Tears so dry and cold
Hardened heart and soil even more

You reap what you harvest they say
As he merely got some hay
But it was time to pay
With even greater pain;
The girls had to obey

To the field they left
In exchange of wheat for some bread
For him to be fed

Figure 2. "The Drought" by Pia Kmeid



Figure 3. Mariam Ghanem, 2nd place winner (left); Bayan Al Omar, 3rd place winner (right)



Figure 4. Reem Ibrahim, tied 1st place winner, designed postcards



Figure 5. Lin Habbal, tied 1st place winner, designed postcards



Figure 6. Jana Rahmoun, 2nd place, designed postcards

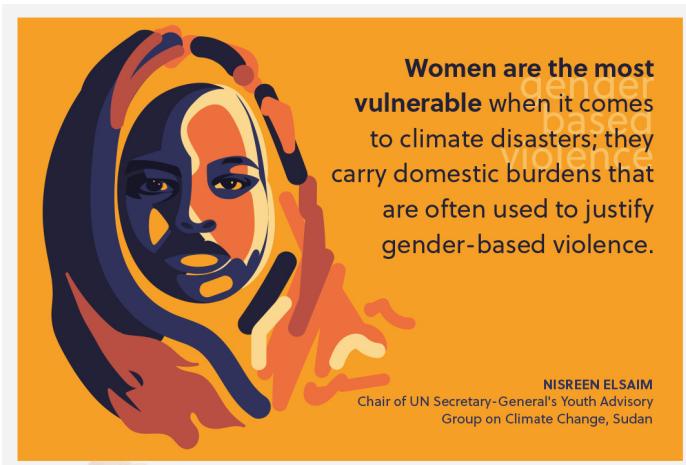


Figure 7. Lea Tannir, 3rd place winner, designed postcard

Profiles

This section includes the profiles of people, organizations, networks, and projects in the MENA region working at the nexus of climate and gender justice. While not exhaustive, this list aims to introduce readers to the work of women and feminist climate activists in the region. To find these profiles, a three-pronged approach was used:

- 1.** Input from climate activists collaborating with the AiW to identify women-led or gender-sensitive climate action initiatives from the region.
- 2.** Online research using key search teams (Boolean) for “women-led initiatives,” “climate change,” “Arab States”, “Middle East,” and “women environmental human rights defenders”.
- 3.** Cross-checking UN websites in the region (e.g., UN Women, UNESCWA) for initiatives featuring women and/or gender perspectives on issues related to climate. Special attention was given to organizations/people/projects aligned with the five SDGs related to climate change, climate action, and sustainable living.

Preference was given to initiatives, actors, and organizations whose work has been prominent in the last 3-5 years, and efforts were made to include a diverse representation across various MENA countries to ensure wide geographic coverage.

NOURA ABDO

Founder of Our Climate Egypt

A chemical engineer, Noura Abdo created Our Climate to help create solutions to fight climate change in the water and energy sectors. Our Climate’s team of seasoned climate action experts educates businesses, entrepreneurs, and young start-ups on the benefits of adopting a “green” and sustainable business. The organization also conducts rigorous and timely research on climate change and develops action strategies that are accessible to a large audience. The organization aims to mainstream climate action at the policy level and create an entire generation in the Arab region who are aware of climate change and the steps that must be taken to protect the climate future of the planet. Our Climate’s impactful work in Egypt and beyond was showcased at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP27) in the Blue Zone, where Noura Abdo was recognized and accredited by the UNFCCC to represent women in Africa as a speaker. Today, Abdo serves as a registered expert on the UN Ocean Decade and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (Noura Abdo | LinkedIn).

BASIMA ABDULRAHMAN

Founder and CEO of KESK

Basima Abdulrahman, a Baghdad-born Kurd and a “green tech” specialist with over a decade of experience, founded KESK, Iraq’s first green tech company, in the aftermath of

ISIS. Her initiative in establishing this company demonstrates “Abdulrahman’s commitment to rebuilding her homeland sustainably” (Sattar, 2024). KESK helps Iraqi entrepreneurs and businesses in developing a green energy plan with an emphasis on solar energy provision and sustainable business models.

Under Abdulrahman’s leadership, the company has led environmental awareness programs for Iraqi youth and facilitated the “green retrofitting” of a school building in Erbil (A Green Solutions Company - Kesk). KESK also plays a crucial role in empowering women in STEM fields, promoting their participation in energy and green development sectors both in Iraq, Kurdistan, and beyond. Abdulrahman prioritizes creating employment opportunities for women within her own organization and provides one-on-one mentoring to women professionals in the sector.

Abdulrahman stresses the influence of her gender perspective on work in green tech and uses her experience to promote the work of other women in her field. “I [am] determined to be part of the solution,” she noted in an interview, “despite the struggles and societal norms that often discourage women from pursuing careers in STEM fields.” Internationally recognized for her contributions, in 2021, Abdulrahman was named a Cartier Women’s Initiative fellow; in 2023 she was included as part of the BBC’s 100 Women List; and most recently, in early 2024, Abdulrahman was shortlisted for the Underdog Tech Award, an award dedicated to innovative tech startup companies around the world (Abdulrahman, 2024; Maisey, 2021).

SALMA BOUGARRANI

Founder and CEO of Green Watech

Salma Bougarrani is the founder and CEO of Green WATECH, a company that produces innovative and affordable water filters for wastewater in rural communities across Morocco (Perez, 2023). The company, which was the winner of the 2018 Global Cleantech Innovation Program in Morocco, was founded to take a stand against the continued privatization of water sanitation that has left many impoverished rural communities without sustainable solutions for unclean water (Shumilova & Mordaszuk, 2023). Bougarrani’s solution involves an at-home filtering system to treat wastewater without requiring traditional sewers. Once filtered, the water is then available to be reused for agricultural purposes within these communities. This system not only provides communities a solution that is “independent from seasonal and temperature fluctuations,” but also proves resilient to climate changes, offering a sustainable alternative to higher-cost solutions offered by private companies.

As a young woman entrepreneur, Bougarrani frequently experienced difficulties entering the field of renewable and sustainable energy due to her gender. As one of the few woman team leaders in the industry in Morocco, she initially struggled to gain the trust and support of her male colleagues. However, through perseverance, Bougarrani has become one of the leading clean technology innovators in Morocco and the region. Her work continues to emphasize both climate action and the critical importance of women entrepreneurs in the fight against climate change.

Regional Efforts: RENEW-MENA

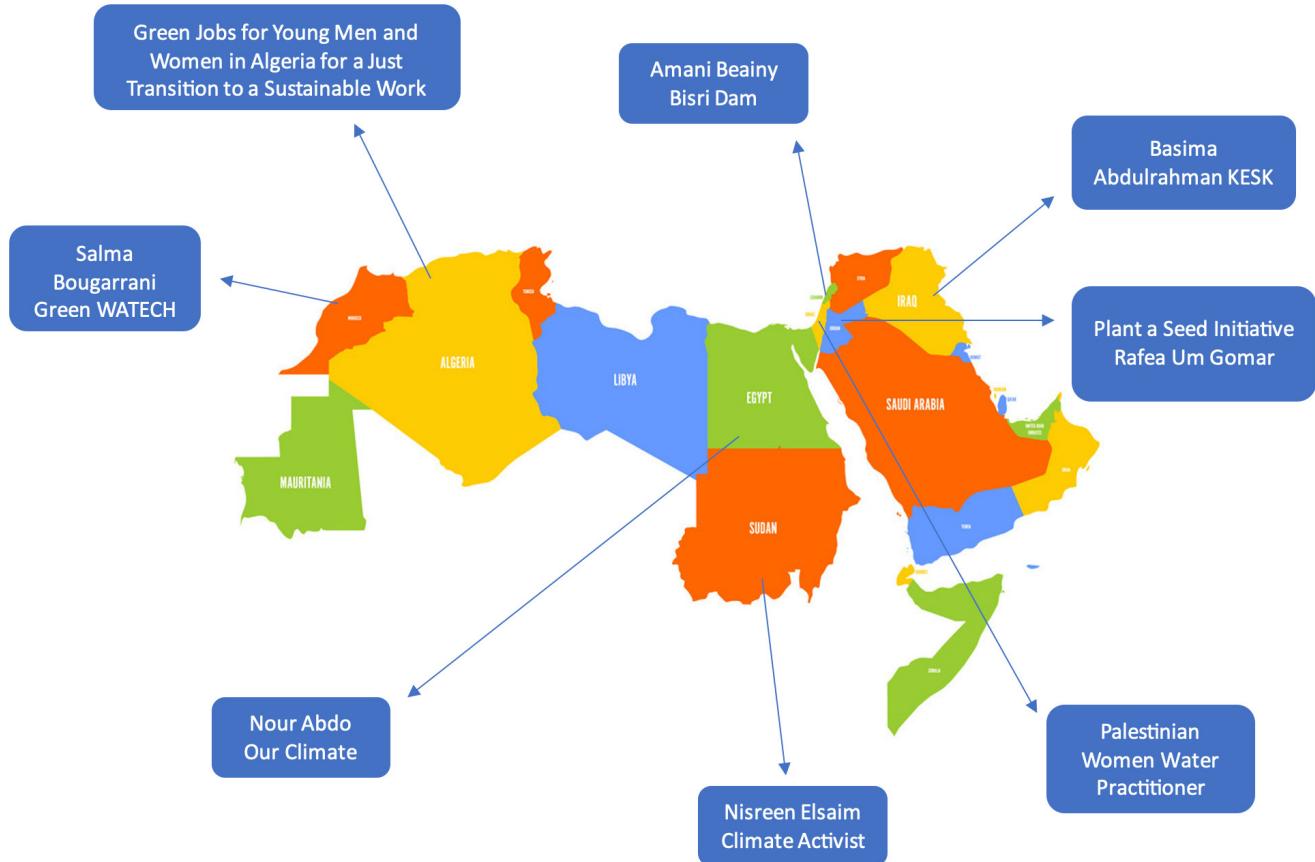


Figure 8. Map of Regional Efforts

AMANI BEAINY

Environmental Activist

Despite her years of activism and work with civil society in Lebanon, Amani Beainy's name is most frequently associated with the Bisri Dam project in Bisri, Lebanon, and her participation in a successful grassroots campaign that eventually brought the project to a halt. Originally proposed in 1953 by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and later approved in 2014, approved by the World Bank, which offered to fund the project through a \$474-million loan, the Bisri Dam project was meant to "solve" the growing concerns related to climate change, including rising temperatures and water scarcity in Lebanon (Bulos & Yam, 2021).

However, for Beainy and other activists, the cost of losing the Bisri Valley far outweighed the supposed "benefits," which they believed would only be distributed among the wealthy. Rampant corruption in Lebanon meant that politicians, the wealthy, and other elites, as well as their affiliates, would profit from public projects meant to serve the greater public interest. Worse, the dam would displace nearly 40,000 local residents and destroy miles of natural habitat around the Valley, effectively destroying Bisri as its inhabitants and their ancestors have known it (Srour, 2019).

In 2015, Beainy co-founded The National Campaign to Protect the Bisri Valley and created a Facebook page to highlight local activists' fight against the Bisri Dam project. Soon, hashtags like #SaveBisri flooded social media, drawing in climate change and climate justice activists from Lebanon and the region, who collectively

demanded an immediate halt to the project. This led to weekly sit-ins in front of government buildings and in camps near the Valley to protest the dam's impact on the Bisri Valley.

Thanks to Beainy's mobilization, and following two long years of protests, the World Bank eventually cancelled \$244 million in funding to the Lebanese government for the proposed Bisri Dam (Zrein, 2020). Despite facing threats of violence from politicians and even members of her own community, Beainy continued to struggle against the Bisri Dam project and for the collective good. For Beainy and other environmental activists in Lebanon, the Bisri Dam project "epitomized the corruption of the ruling class, which has undertaken projects, and shared quotas at the expense of Lebanon and its people" (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom/WILPF, 2019).

Beainy notes that drawing Lebanon's attention to the Bisri Dam project is tied to the larger struggles that emerged in the country during the Thawra, or revolution, that took place in October 2019:

In my opinion, the environmental struggle was one of the factors that led to the outbreak of the revolution. For me, the revolution is an inseparable extension of the sit-ins that we started two years ago as environmental activists in the "National Campaign to Preserve Marj Bisri." (WILPF)

Today, Beainy and other environmental activists continue to speak out against the Bisri Dam project. She continues to publicly challenge politicians and other elites who are desperate to implement the project (Zrein, 2021) and continues to write openly about the dangers of such

projects, emphasizing the need to consult adequately scientific evidence and local knowledge about the environmental and social consequences of such works (Allaaw & Beainy, 2023).

NISREEN ELSAIM

Climate Activist

As protests and violence rocked the Sudanese capital in early 2023, Nisreen Elsaim continued to speak out on behalf of young Sudanese and the effects of climate change on this generation. While Sudan is often discussed in relation to its various political conflicts, it is also one of the country's most vulnerable to climate variability (UN News, 2023). This vulnerability exacerbates poverty levels and hinders economic growth, making it a "threat multiplier" by activists and civil society. Rising temperatures, sporadic rainfall, and extreme weather, including flooding and drought, have all "made agriculture more perilous for almost two-thirds of rural Sudanese who...are either smallholder farmers or pastoralists relying on the rains" (UN Environment Program/UNEP, 2023).

“As young Sudanese, climate change is not just papers or documents. It's something we are living every day, through its impacts. [Heat]waves, dust storms, sandstorms, heavy rain, sometimes heavy drought...We must remember that young people

are the most impacted generation because the very much devastating impacts of climate change are yet to come. We are the generation who is going to be responsible for holding this burden... We have to be ready.”

Nisreen Elsaim

Sudanese women, who "are largely responsible for household food security and child rearing," in particular, "bear a disproportionate burden from climate change" in the country (UNEP). Traditional gender norms restrict women to small-scale subsistence farming (70% of all women farmers are small-scale or subsistence farmers) and prevent them from using agricultural machinery and other technological advancements that make farming easier (UN Climate Change, 2023). Consequently, women have become key allies for environmental activists, raising awareness about the issue and developing solutions to the crisis. They are being trained in nature-based solutions, including farming techniques to mitigate crop loss and improve drought resilience. Local organizations, like Zenab for Women in Development (ZWD) provide "climate resilient agricultural input packages, hands-on training on conservation agricultural techniques, access to finance and access to market" for women farmers to support them amidst the devastation of climate change (ZWD, 2023). As a young Sudanese woman herself, Elsaim's activism is about preserving

the future for herself and her compatriots. During her Master's degree in renewable energy, Elsaim became an active member of local climate change campaigns and quickly rose to become one of Sudan's most-recognized youth climate activists. Today, she is the coordinator of the Youth Environment Sudan (YES) network, which brings together more than 100 Sudanese environmental organizations. Elsaim is also a member of the Pan-African Alliance for Climate Justice (Africa Women Experts, 2021).

Elsaim's accomplishments are impressive: She is the chair of the UN Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change and the Chair of the Sudan Youth Organization on Climate Change. She frequents high-level meetings around the world, where she addresses world leaders about the devastating impact of climate change on the hopes of a dignified future for the youth not only in Sudan but around the world.

My message [to world leaders] is that you cannot rule a dead planet. Soon there will not be humanity...In order to sustain the life you are living, the life we are living, the life of your child, your grandchild...You should be caring about the future generations. (UN Climate Change, 2022)

MENA Regional Network in Energy for Women (RENEW-MENA)

RENEW-MENA is a network and program operated by the World Bank, launched in 2022, that aims at creating a supportive and empowering network and information hub for women entrepreneurs in the clean energy sector in the MENA region. The network and

program are founded on three pillars: supporting women and youth to transition from science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education to the workplace, supporting the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women in clean energy, and empowering entrepreneurship and financial inclusion with a focus on renewables and new technology (Weges, 2023). RENEW-MENA has established an internship program that provides young women entrepreneurs in the clean energy sector with mentorship and guidance. The network also promotes region-wide webinars, conferences, and other learning opportunities for innovators in the MENA region interested in becoming involved in the clean energy sector. In the summer of 2023, RENEW-MENA held its first regional conference, bringing together nearly 100 representatives from government, academia, international organizations (including international finance institutions (IFIs), the United Nations, and others), as well as private companies. The conference focused on discussing the region's energy needs and the critical role that women in the MENA region can play in the clean energy sector. As part of this first regional conference, RENEW-MENA granted awards to several individuals and institutions "for their accomplishments in driving the energy transition and being a role model for the women and institutions in the region" (Weges, 2023).

“Green Jobs for Young Men and Women in Algeria for a Just Transition to a Sustainable Work Future” Program

In Algeria, the International Labour Organization (ILO) partnered with local employers' and workers' organizations to launch the “Green Jobs for Young Men and Women in Algeria for a Just Transition to a Sustainable Work Future” program in 2022 (International Labor Organization/ILO). The program aims to promote greener jobs “through sustainable entrepreneurship and the creation of microenterprises in the green economy, with a special focus on women” (Deininger et al., 2023). Green jobs are particularly important for women because they combine “decent work”—work that is appropriately remunerated, provides support to employees, and is dignified labor, per the ILO’s definition—and they focus on “green” sectors that take action against climate change. This combination is what the ILO means when they reference a “just transition to environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all” (Checa, 2021). The project in Algeria supports young entrepreneurs, including women, in finding decent work while simultaneously participating in climate action to help the country’s economy transition towards green energy and sustainable resource use.

Palestinian Women Water Practitioner Network (PWWPN)

Founded with the support of the Palestinian Hydrology Group, the Palestinian Women Water Practitioner Network (PWWPN) was established in 2021 as a knowledge platform for women involved in projects related to clean water. Its primary goal is to connect women professionals and practitioners in WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) in Palestine, aiming to “improve their participation in decision making and improve their access to opportunities and income” (PWWPN). The PWWPN targets women water practitioners who are “rooted in society and are active” in their communities and seeks to elevate their profiles “both in their professional capacity and as a major group in society,” in Palestine and across the MENA region. To achieve these objectives, the PWWPN engages in lobbying and advocacy efforts at the national level to ensure that women water practitioners have a voice in climate action policy and strategy development. Additionally, PWWPN prioritizes research on the status of women water practitioners in Palestine and the broader landscape of clean water initiatives in the country.

The network also offers mentorship services, skills trainings, and job opportunities to young women entering the water sector, when available. Recently, the PWWPN supported an initiative led by Asmaa Tabanjah, who is pioneering a new and innovative solution to water purification. Tabanjah’s

project is to test “the use of seeds from dates and olives [combined with an] activated coal mixture as [a] membrane for wastewater treatment.” As one European organization, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, noted in their profile of Tabanjah’s work, “the initial results of the pilot project have been very positive and Asmaa will continue her work to scale up the project” (Kvinna till Kvinna, 2022).

“Plant a Seed” Initiative

In 2023, The Jordan Times reported on an initiative called “Plant a Seed,” led by two Jordanian women. Israa Shamlouni and Tahani Shuhaima, with the support of the North Valley Pioneers Association and in collaboration with the UNDP, established this initiative to raise awareness about food scarcity in the Jordan Valley. Their goal was to encourage households to take small, sustainable steps by utilizing unused spaces in their homes to create small gardens using recyclable and other materials that are typically discarded as trash. The project also educates households on the types of materials that they can use to fertilize and grow their small gardens, optimal growing seasons, and how to properly plant and care for seedlings.

RAFEA UM GOMAR

The First Woman Solar Engineer in Jordan

By Lara Sammour

Breaking free from the constraints of her conservative upbringing in Manshiat Al-Ghayath in Eastern Jordan, Rafea Um Gomar defied gender roles and fought her way to become the first female solar engineer in Jordan.

Um Gomar, a Bedouin woman, gained international acclaim for her pioneering efforts in promoting renewable energy and advocating for women’s empowerment. In 2013, she was selected to participate in the Barefoot College program in India, which trains women from rural communities to become solar engineers.

Language barriers, cultural differences, and conservatism in her hometown weren’t the only obstacles that complicated her journey towards success. A mother of two girls, Um Gomar faced blackmail from her husband, who threatened to take away her children if she continued pursuing her dream. However, her parents were strong leaders who supported her throughout. With their encouragement, she successfully completed the program and became the first woman in her village to install and maintain solar panels (GirlTalkHQ, 2014).

Upon returning to Jordan, Um Gomar used her newly acquired skills to bring solar power to her village, providing electricity to approximately 80 homes. This introduction of solar energy was groundbreaking, not only for its use of green energy sources but also for its profound impact on families living in poverty. Um Gomar’s successes and contributions positioned her as an advocate for renewable energy and women’s empowerment, leading her to speak at international conferences and inspire others in her community to follow in her footsteps (UN Women, 2015).

Um Gomar’s achievements culminated in her election as the first female municipal council member in her village. She dreams of founding a solar energy training center in the future, aiming to empower young women to become independent community leaders.

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