



FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
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Policy Brief

# SAFEGUARDING LIVES & LIVELIHOODS

## Addressing Unsafe Transportation for Women Farmworkers in Tunisia.

*"Trucks of No Return"*



# Imprint

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## Executive Summary:

Women farmworkers are vital to Tunisia's agricultural industry, but their safety is jeopardized by a lack of reliable, regulated transportation. The disturbing number of deaths and injuries brought on by risky travel behaviours mostly involving cramped and badly maintained cars is brought to light in this policy brief.

These occurrences have a substantial financial impact since they result in lost productivity and medical expenses that surpass \$100 million yearly. The brief suggests a number of strategies, such as employer accountability, mandatory safety standards, cooperative partnerships, subsidized transit networks, and enhanced social security protocols.

## Introduction:

With a sizable percentage of the workforce, women constitute the backbone of Tunisia's agricultural industry. For the country's economic growth and food security, their participation is essential. However, dangerous transit poses a serious risk to their health and, sadly, even their lives. Because they sometimes have to drive great distances to go to fields, women farmworkers are compelled to rely on packed, unlicensed cars, which results in an alarmingly high number of fatalities and injuries.

A 2022 study published by the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights stated that dangerous transportation events had claimed the lives of nearly fifty women who work as farmworkers in the last three years.

Many others have suffered serious injuries. Action must be taken quickly and thoroughly in response to this worrying trend.

## Overview:

Women employed in agriculture have a structural issue as they lack access to safe, regulated transportation. They rely on informal, ad hoc arrangements, like overloaded pickup trucks. Some vehicles are frequently too spacious, badly maintained, and devoid of standard safety features. Many drivers also lack the required training and license. These dangerous decisions put an even greater financial strain on women farmworkers, whose income is already insufficient. Too many people are forced to choose between jeopardizing their safety and forgoing significant income.

# 1. Challenges from Every Angle: Systemic Challenges and Vulnerabilities:

In Tunisia, female farmworkers are vulnerable in all facets of their jobs, but especially when it comes to long hours, a lack of social rights, poor pay, and hazardous working conditions.

Informal and unstructured employment is common in the agriculture industry, particularly for seasonal workers. Employers frequently ignore the Labor Code's requirements in these situations. Women, who make up 58% of the agricultural labor force, are disproportionately impacted by this dangerous scenario. For a full day's labor, they often get salaries that are between 25% and 50% less than those of males, or between 10 and 15 Tunisian dinars.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Secteur non structuré, politique, économique et structuration sociale en Tunisie 1970-1985. Jacques Charmes, p.231-250.

Hard working circumstances are faced by female farmworkers. They must put in long hours of hard labor, such as moving big packages, bending over, crouching, and climbing trees. In addition, they have to withstand inclement weather and dangerous chemicals without any safety measures. Because they lack the means to demand their fundamental rights as employees when working outside of a contract, all of these issues make these women farmworkers even more vulnerable. Therefore, throughout the overall cycle of instability in this industry, rural women stand as the most vulnerable link.

## 1.1 Social and Systemic Marginalization:

- **Lack of state-provided transportation:** Following the widespread awareness campaigns launched by various groups in recent years and the media coverage of the road accidents that these women farmworkers endure, transportation is one of the most well-known occupational risks that they confront in Tunisia. Actually, each year scores of women who work as farmworkers are killed in traffic accidents. Between 2015 and the beginning of 2021, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights documented over 700 injuries and 50 fatalities.<sup>2</sup>

These women encounter several infractions on their way to their places of employment, even if they survive the dangerous travels. These cars do not meet even the most fundamental passenger safety requirements. Throughout their way to reach the work destination, women are compelled to stand and be outside in all weather conditions and seasons. To maximize their revenues per trip, truck owners will not think twice about packing their vehicles to capacity with passengers in the rear. They also throw water on the truck bed so that they are unable to sit down and stop them from carrying their baggage to save room. Women farmworkers' health and well-being are severely impacted by these poor transportation circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

- **Policy Failures and Shortcomings:**

The complex web of stakeholders involved in agricultural transportation poses a significant challenge to effective decision-making and reform efforts in this sector. Responsibility for road accidents involving women farmworkers is often attributed to multiple entities, each with varying degrees of involvement. This can lead to confusion, overlapping jurisdictions, and a lack of accountability.

The fragmented nature of responsibility also impedes meaningful reform and an effective "Call to Action" plan in the agricultural transportation sector. Assigning blame and identifying the root causes of problems become difficult when multiple actors are involved. This can lead to a cycle of inaction, preventing the implementation of necessary measures to improve safety and working conditions for women farmworkers.

**"Decree n°724 of 31 August 2020":** Despite the issuance of Government Decree No. 2020-724 dated August 31, 2020, which outlines the conditions for the transportation of agricultural workers and the requirements of this service, the reality remains that there is no actual effective monitoring or enforcement of these regulations in the agricultural transportation sector. The decree is unable to adequately handle the intricacies of the agricultural transportation environment. The sheer volume of players involved in its execution is daunting, and its bureaucratic procedures are onerous. Its effective implementation is hampered as a result of a lack of accountability and clarity.

Established by the decree, the Regional Advisory Committee for the Transportation of Agricultural Workers is made up of representatives from a number of ministries and agencies, including the Land Transport Agency, the Governorate, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of

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<sup>2</sup> Le FTDES s'indigne du décès d'une travailleuse agricole et dénonce une marginalisation qui se poursuit, par **M.B.Z.**

<sup>3</sup> Peasant workers in the area of Sidi Bouzid, 23 October 2022.

Agriculture, the Ministry of Water Resources and Fisheries, and the Ministry of Equipment. But the order is vague about each committee member's duties and the extent of their involvement. The procedure of monitoring and enforcing the law is further complicated by this uncertainty.

**"Act n° 51 of 2019":** It is important to note that even with Act n° 51 of 2019 creating a category for the "transport of farm workers," the practice of carrying women in trucks still exists. An initiative that was implemented almost four years ago. Consequently, the persistent and recurring instances show that there is, indeed, there is a lack of a defined strategy that outlines roles, concentrates the required mechanisms for putting the law into effect, and makes the legislation easier for the relevant groups to access. Laws alone are insufficient to address complex difficulties and deeply ingrained concerns. Therefore, it can be preferable to get to know these groups, get aware of their reality, comprehend their worries, inquiries, and goals, and engage them in planning and thought processes before passing legislation.

I provide evidence for this assertion by citing the protest movement led by a group of women employed in the agricultural sector on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2023.<sup>4</sup>

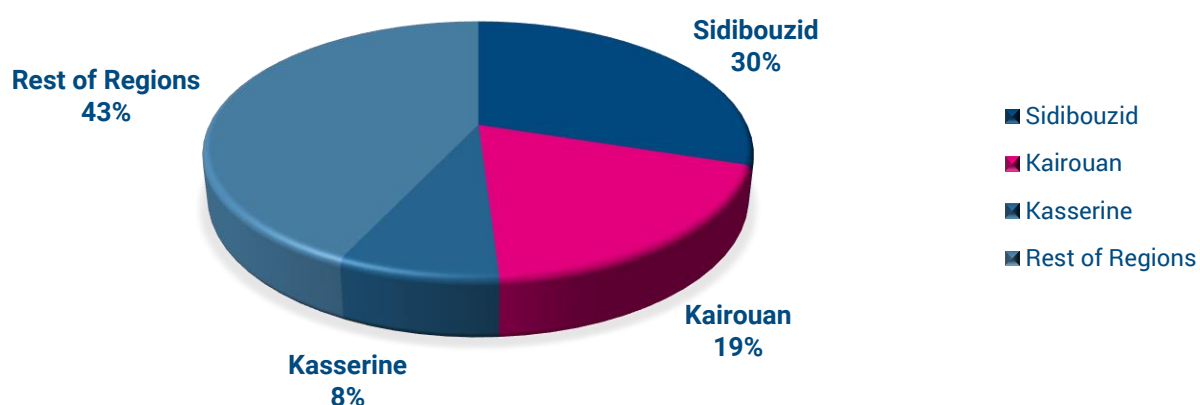
Since farming relies heavily on female labor and employs nearly 80% of the workforce in the industry, it is imperative that the issue of women workers' transfers and the state's response to these accidents be addressed with a sincere and radical treatment of economic and social issues. A development vision that does not overlook regulating the seasonal work of women in small-scale and field labor is required as well, in a way that upholds their rights to social security, health coverage, and decent pay.

### Incidents Recorded Since 2015

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	TOTAL
Accidents	7	10	5	6	8	4	12	10	8	5	75
Wounded	85	151	85	119	72	40	131	52	60	78	873
Deaths	7	6	7	5	15	6	1	5	4	4	60

Source: *In the invisible narrative of the incidents of peasant transportation trucks*, Hayet Attar, The Tunisian Forum for Economic & Social Rights.

### Accident Rates By Region since 2015



Source: The Tunisian Forum for Economic & Social Rights.

<sup>4</sup> A protest by more than 200 Female Agricultural Workers in front of the Ministry of Women, Kapitalis 24 Nov.2023.

## 1.2 Financial Vulnerability: A Vulnerable Segment in the Production Process

One of the main causes of rural women's economic insecurity in the agriculture industry is the gender pay gap. Their poor salaries contribute to the multifaceted cycle of poverty, which is caused by a complex interaction of social, cultural, and economic variables. In the end, this "feminized poverty" undermines rural women's capacity to make a good life as the primary breadwinners by reflecting the economic inequality they experience. Women inherit this deprivation from one generation to the next, which feeds the cycle of feminine poverty and complex forms of economic violence.

- **The Role of Intermediaries in the Agricultural Labor Market:**

Rural women's fate in the agricultural labor market are greatly influenced by their network of ties. There are three primary actors in this network:

Female Farmworkers: The agricultural industry relies on these women for work.

Intermediaries: These people take on the role of truck drivers/transporters, driving women to the workplace and frequently splitting their pay.

Landowners: These people set the terms of work in the end.

- **The Prevalence of Unpaid Labor and Its Consequences:**

Despite being the main providers for their families, 57.9%<sup>5</sup> of female agricultural workers are unpaid laborers. They get seasonal help or a portion of the produce in exchange for their labor on family plots. This circumstance emphasizes how poverty, marginalization, and informality are all intertwined. In their day-to-day existence, rural women are intensely conscious of their marginalization and subordination. They frequently resort to unauthorized labor in the agricultural industry because to a lack of options, which puts their lives in danger. They become entangled in a web of relationships through this kind of job, which furthers their marginalization and counts them among the "new poor".

## 2. Gender at the Crossroads: Female Workers, Transporters and Landowners:

### 2.1 Seasonal and Unstable Employment:

The agricultural work performed by women is primarily seasonal, varying according to the seasons, geographical areas, and the nature of the agricultural holdings (open fields, greenhouses, multi-chapel greenhouses...). The only common denominator is the instability of employment. According to a study carried out by the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, most women work more than eight hours a day, some of whom do not enjoy weekly rest, especially seasonal workers, because the rest day is not free of charge. In addition, peasant work is fragile, as female peasant workers work without legal contracts, which makes them vulnerable to occupational instability and extortion by intermediaries or direct employers.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that transporters and intermediaries play a major role in the employment and exploitation of Female farmworkers. According to the study, mediation interferes in determining the method of drawing wages, which usually range from daily to weekly wages. This phenomenon contributes to the elimination of the liability of direct employers and perpetuates the status of an illegal framework as sometimes women are denied access to their wages.

In most cases, females are paid less than males. This discrimination is mainly due to the patriarchal nature of society, which has provided a material basis for the exploitation of women in rural areas and has denied their enormous efforts, making some of them recognize the capacity of this old social giver despite its unjust essence.

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<sup>5</sup> Rapport National Tunisie 2014.



## 2.2 Neglected Infrastructure and Transportation Challenges:

Neglected agricultural regions have weak infrastructure, especially when it comes to highways. Only a small percentage of the whole road network is made up of paved roads. For example, around 58% of the 5,781 kilometres of rural roads in Sidi Bouzid are still unpaved.<sup>7</sup> Those who work in the agricultural industry find it nearly difficult to use public transportation since buses and minibuses used for rural transit are unable to go on muddy roads. As a result, in order to go to the agricultural regions, female agricultural laborers are compelled to depend on trucks for transportation.

## 2.3 Dependence on Intermediaries:

Women who work in agriculture are typically totally dependent on truck drivers, who also serve as a middleman between the landowners and the laborers. They depend on their good connection with the middleman to guarantee them work and, by extension, money. Additionally, it guarantees transportation from their residences to the agricultural holding, which may be many tens of kilometers apart. The majority of the time, there is no other choice: because they are all in the same dangerous condition, they cannot collaborate with one another, rely on public transit, or even possess private cars.

The agricultural work in this context is characterized by its precarious nature, instability, and exposure to exploitation. Their vulnerability is increased and inadequate infrastructure, transportation issues, and reliance on drivers/intermediaries limit their chances for good labour and economic empowerment. Strengthening the bargaining power of female agricultural workers, encouraging alternate transportation alternatives, enhancing infrastructure, and establishing channels for reporting and resolving abuse are just a few of the major strategies needed to address these problem

## Recommendations

### Toward a Safer and More Dignified Journey:

#### 1. Establish Monitoring and Enforcement Mechanisms:

- **Form Regional Committees:** To supervise the execution of Decree No. 51/2019 and keep an eye on adherence to transportation safety laws, the Ministries of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Fisheries shall form regional committees.
- **Undertake Regular Inspections:** To make sure that vehicles used to transport workers satisfy safety requirements, the Ministries of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Fisheries, in cooperation with the Ministries of Transport and Interior, shall undertake routine inspections of the vehicles.
- **Put in Place a Reporting System:** Create a centralized reporting system where workers may report infractions of transportation safety laws and request support in the event of misconduct or mistreatment.

#### 2. Enhance Awareness and Training:

- **Conduct Awareness Campaigns:** To raise awareness among workers, transportation providers, and the public about transportation safety protocols and agricultural workers' rights, the Ministry of Women, Family, and Childhood should engage with civil society groups to organize awareness campaigns.

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<sup>7</sup> Infrastructure: Construction of rural roads in Sidi Bouzid, Khalil

Kadura 2021.

- **Women in decision-making:** When it comes to transportation options, women farmworkers should have a proactive role in the decision-making process. When creating and executing successful interventions that cater to individuals unique needs and concerns, their perspectives and experiences are invaluable.
- **Provide Driver Training:** For drivers who transport female farmworkers, the Ministry of Transport ought to mandate safe driving techniques, vehicle upkeep, and emergency protocols.

### 3. Establish a Comprehensive Transportation System:

- **Create Agricultural Employment Offices:** Within its regional extension services and advisory cells, the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Fisheries ought to set up agricultural employment offices. These offices ought to act as a bridge between workers, drivers, and farmers.
- **Implement a Vehicle Modification Program:** The Ministry of Transportation ought to create a program that makes it easier for vehicles used to carry workers to be adjusted in accordance with safety regulations.
- **Promote Social Protection:** Expanding social protection coverage for agricultural workers, including health insurance, accident insurance, and unemployment compensation, should be a joint effort between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministries of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Fisheries.

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