Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

# Near East and North Africa Gender Newsletter

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## International Women's Day 2021: an opportunity for FAO to reflect on rural women's leadership

On March 10th, the Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (FAO RNE) celebrated International Women's Day (IWD) with the organization of the webinar ***"If not now, when? Investing in rural women's leadership to build back better and more inclusive food systems"***. The event was attended by more than 90 participants, including FAO colleagues, experts from other UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, private sector and the academia.

In line with the theme selected by the international community for IWD, the webinar provided a chance to specifically discuss the challenges and opportunities for promoting rural women's leadership, and to learn about approaches and interventions that are successful in enhancing women's voice and participation in the Near East and North Africa region.

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After the opening remarks provided by Jean-Marc Faurès (FAO Regional Programme Leader), Valentina Franchi (FAO Regional Gender Expert) welcomed the panel, composed of four experts with a long-standing experience in the promotion of women's empowerment: Dr. Fadia Kiwan (Director General of the Arab Women Organization), Ms. Chema Gargouri (Founder of the Tunisian Association for Management and Social Stability), Dr. Hoda Yassa (President of the Arab Women's Investors Union), and Ms. Fatiha Guerrouche (Director of the Institut National de la Vulgarisation Agricole in Algeria).

The interventions of the panelists highlighted the key constraints to rural women's leadership and advocated for moving beyond interventions that only focus on women's access to productive resources, to tackle more systematically issues of control, agency and decision-making power. After the first round of interventions from the speakers, the floor was opened for questions and comments. Many participants intervened, enriching the conversation with their different experiences and insights on the topic.

During the virtual celebration of IWD.

The event aimed to reiterate FAO's commitment to promote rural women's participation and leadership in rural institutions and organizations, and to re-emphasize that women and girls have equal opportunities to influence the decision-making processes that impact on their lives, in alignment with the new corporate Policy on Gender Equality 2020-30.

**Contributed by:** Maggie Refaat, Gender Specialist, with inputs from Valentina Franchi, Regional Gender Expert. FAO, RNE.

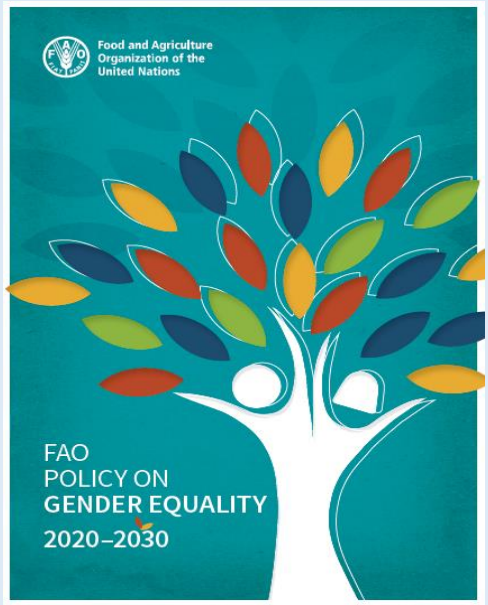
## A new corporate Policy on Gender Equality

In alignment with the priorities set by the international agenda, the new FAO Policy on Gender Equality provides the Organization with a corporate framework to orient its technical and normative work towards clear gender equality objectives relevant to its mandate:

1) Equal participation and decision-making
2) Equal rights, access to and control over natural and productive resources
3) Equal rights, access to and control over services, markets and employment opportunities
4) Reduction of women's work burden

The Policy recognizes that a gender-responsive organizational environment is necessary to achieve progress towards these objectives. It therefore includes a set of minimum standards for gender mainstreaming to ensure that gender dimensions are adequately addressed in all organizational functions, from results-based management to staff learning and evidence generation.

Recognizing that all staff have a role to play in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment, the Policy establishes a shared accountability framework that clearly outlines responsibilities for its implementation across the Organization.



## IWD in Syria: FAO celebrates with a focus on equitable participation and decision-making power

In the occasion of IWD, the FAO office in the Syrian Arab Republic organized a training session on equitable participation and decision-making, aimed at highlighting the challenges that women face in getting their voices heard and discussing the support needed to overcome them.

Organized in collaboration with the local NGO Al Tamayz and the Arab Beekeeping Union, the session was attended by 25 women, who are also involved in one of food processing units established by FAO in the outskirts of Damascus. To mark the occasion, FAO distributed purple wool scarfs and gloves – matching the official color of IWD - as a gift to all participants in the session.

The training was well received. Asma Shahin, one of the women who attended the training, has expressed her enthusiasm: "I am very happy to have participated in this session. Now that I have learnt about how important is for to me participate in decision-making, and that I have received useful tips on how to contribute effectively to discussions and debates, I feel more confident in expressing my ideas to anyone, including my husband! I also feel that I am able to give advice to people who may approach me to receive support".

Some of the participants during their celebration of IWD.

FAO Syria is profoundly committed to supporting and empowering rural women. In 2020, FAO designed and delivered special training sessions on entrepreneurship skills and small-scale business management, targeted specifically at rural women. The goal of these trainings was to provide women with adequate entrepreneurial skills to enable them to participate in the agricultural sector. As demonstrated by several FAO studies, when women have equal access to services and resources, their contribution to the rural development and the eradication of hunger and poverty can make a real difference.

This is why FAO gives high priority to collaborate with all its relevant partners to ensure that women have the chance to participate and be involved in any activity and programme.

**Contributed by:** Salma Hakki, Communication Officer. FAO, Syria.

## IWD in Lebanon: the celebrations highlight women's role in agriculture and in the response to COVID-19

**Did you know that women make up 43 percent of the agricultural labor force in Lebanon's rural areas? And did you know that in 2010, only 9% of farms were led and operated by women, while female farmers cultivated only 5 percent of total agricultural land?**

These are very informative statistics that were shared by the FAO office in Lebanon on International Women's Day 2021. On this occasion, in fact, FAO released the fifth issue of its quarterly briefing notes on the role of Lebanese women in agriculture, highlighting FAO's interventions in response to the main gender-based constraints and their impacts.

A design made specifically for the briefing notes.

The FAO office also seized the opportunity of IWD to celebrate women who achieved economic independence due to their participation in projects and programmes, including those presented in the video "Beekeeping for women's empowerment" (available on FAO YouTube page) and whose lives have changed when they started engaging in income-generating activities that were later and transformed it into a viable business.

In collaboration with other UN agencies, FAO also honored all women who were, and still are, at the frontline in the fight against COVID-19. The agencies sought to pay a tribute to the countless women in Lebanon who strive in their communities to combat the far-reaching health, economic and social impacts of the pandemic on the Lebanese community. Among the tools used for this awareness raising campaign, a map of Lebanon that highlight the places where female community leaders are making a difference to respond to the multiple crises facing the country. The map is a permanent feature on the website of the UN in Lebanon.

A social media campaign was also run from the 8th to the 14th of March on the social platforms of all UN agencies in Lebanon, including social media cards and stories of some female leaders in Lebanon, in representation of the thousands of women working in their communities to address the current crises Lebanon is facing.

**Contributed by:** Elite Shehadeh Sfeir, Communications Consultant, approved by MarieLouise Hayek, Programme Assistant and Gender Focal Point, FAO Lebanon.

## Empowering women farmers to run their own businesses in Yemen

***"My door is always opened to other women in my community"***

It was early in the morning when the FAO Yemen team has phoned Jabra Omar, a dairy producer from the governorate of Hudaydah, to follow up on her successful production line started one year ago as a result of FAO's support. Unfortunately, due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, phone calls are now the only way for the office to contact beneficiaries and assess field activities.

Jabra responded to FAO's call from her workplace, where she had already started her daily work on dairy processing. It was possible to hear the voices of her children frolicking around her, while she was working. "I am processing the milk in my workplace, which was equipped by FAO" Jabra explained when asked about what she was doing, "and I am starting to prepare new products to meet the demands of my clients".

Equipped workplaces aim to provide an adequate working space for small-scale dairy milk processers and producers like Jabra, allowing them to perform their activities in compliance with safety and quality standards, and ultimately reduce food losses, especially during the summer, when temperatures in Yemen can exceed 50 degrees °C.

Jabra's success can be seen from the increase in the number of livestock assets she owns. She went from owning two milking cows at the start of the project to owning and managing more than 30: an incredible improvement achieved in such a short period of time. "When I first started, I did not have any ruminants; I used my savings to investing my livestock production and now I have more than 30 sheep and 20 milking cows," said Jabra.

Jabra is now more capable of facing challenges and dealing with crises, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a significant impact on her business. In fact, her production has recently dropped from more than 300 liters of fresh milk processed per day to only 40 liters per day. Fortunately, this was not enough to derail her and her company. One of the key lessons Jabra learned from her experience is the importance of knowledge sharing, which she is already putting into practice in her community as she works to build the capacities of other women farmers and share her successful experience. "My door is always open to other women in my community, and I am available to provide various types of support, such as sharing my knowledge or providing financial assistance which makes me feel happy and grateful", said Jabra.

Jabra while processing milk before going to the market.

Jabra had another child in the last year. She had to have a cesarean section, and for the first time, she was able to cover the cost of the procedure with her savings, "I could cover the cost of the surgery – which is over 35 000 Yemeni Real (USD 550) – with the savings I gained from the project's activities. I no longer needed to borrow money to meet any of my or my family's needs", added Jabra.

***"I feel independent, and it was such a gift to learn this profession."***

Belqees Al Shar'abi is a 51-year-old mother of four children, lives in Sabr village in Tuban district of the Lahj governorate.

She and her husband both contribute to the family's income, which is why she first began processing small quantities (20 liters of milk per day) of dairy products together with other women farmers in her village.

"I was fortunate to be one of the 11 female farmers selected under the Enhanced Rural Resilience in Yemen (ERRY) II project," said Belqees. FAO's project funded by the European Union and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency aims to achieve resilient livelihoods and food security in Yemen.

With this purpose, it aims to facilitate women farmer's participation in the dairy value chain by providing them with access to rehabilitated processing units, equipped with essential tools and equipment.

Belqees Al-Shar'abi, the head of a diary processing unit in Sabr village, Tuban district, Lahj governorate.

"Before joining the program, we were processing very small quantities of milk," Belqees, the head of the Sabr dairy processing group, told FAO. The people in the village didn't know who we were, they didn't trust us, and the farmers refused to give us the milk we needed. However, everything changed for the better later on."

"Before the program, I knew nothing about dairy production or the hygienic standards required when handling dairy products and cattle, but now I am capable of running the dairy processing unit and training other beneficiaries," she added. Finally, "I have gained marketing skills that have enabled me to communicate more effectively with others; everyone in my village now recognizes me as a dairy producer."

Belqees and the other group members can produce at least 70 items per day, including yogurt, cheese and ghee – with a net profit of about USD 450 per month. They are able to save the majority of their earnings and are planning to expand their activities in the future. "I have a dream. And my dream is to run my very own dairy processing business", says Belqees. All members of the dairy processing unit dream big: they hope to increase their production, reach more markets, and earn more money to support their families.

**Contributed by:** First story was written by FAO Office in Yemen. Second story is written by FAO Office in Yemen and UNDP

## An FAO-EU project in Iraq rebuilds rural women's livelihoods and hopes

***"Daesh killed my dreams and my family's plans, but FAO and the EU revived them!".***

Words of hope from Dhuhaa Najm Shith, one of the many female dairy producers who are still struggling to recover from the conflict in Iraq.

Everyone in the country loves Al-Qimar, Iraq's signature soft cheese cream, as well as other local traditional dairy products such as butter, ghee (dohn Horr), laban, guishwa and other local varieties of white cheeses. Yet, few people are aware that the dairy farmers who produce these products are primarily rural women, who are often regarded as the most vulnerable segment of the Iraqi society. Women dairy producers in the Governorate of Nineveh, the "breadbasket" of Iraq, have been severely impacted by the conflict. "They gave us hours to leave," said Dhuhaa, who was forced, together with many others, to leave their homes, farms and dreams due to the conflict caused by ISIL between 2014 and 2017.

Thick butter cream named GAYMER, is popular over Iraq.

Within the framework of post-crisis development efforts for rebuilding agricultural livelihoods, FAO is empowering rural women and reviving the hopes of returnees in Iraq thanks to an EU-funded project, aimed at revitalizing Iraq's high-value crop and livestock systems, as well as agri-food based micro-enterprises.

The Nineveh Governorate produces most of the country's grain, including 20-30 percent of Iraq's wheat, and is the major reservoir of livestock in Iraq.

The ISIL occupation of Mosul and of large parts of Nineveh territory between 2014 and 2017 displaced over one million people, mainly from rural areas, and severely damaged the agriculture sector. Farmers, especially in rural areas, are still struggling to recover after returning home to find infrastructure destroyed, assets looted and livestock stolen, missing or slaughtered.

Dhuha and her family are trying to rebuild their dairy business.

"They returned and threatened us with weapons. My husband's attempts to refuse did not work, and because they insisted, the entire family was forced to leave the house and head to the house of my brother-in-law. My husband remained near the buffalo shed, and witnessed what happened next. They broke the barn door to gain access to a large cannon, which they set it up near the forage shed," recalls Dhuhaa, with sadness and tears almost bursting from her eyes.

Dhuhaa and her family, like many other rural households in the area, rely on milk production as their main source of income and must now rebuild everything they have lost due to the conflict. She smiles as she recalls her life prior to the conflict: "I used to raise buffaloes, preparing feed for them, and watering them in a place next to the barn. I used to milk the buffaloes and put the milk in the containers every day before the sunrise. I then extracted Al-Qimar (Iraqi thick buttercream) to sell it, together with the raw milk in the city market. My life, between housework and raising buffaloes in the barn, had a taste of sweetness."

Milk production from Awassi sheep and buffalos is one of the main economic activities in the area, especially for women, who are mainly responsible for the home-based processing of traditional dairy products, which are in very high-demand.

However, rural women are frequently denied the opportunity to realize their hopes and dreams. Despite accounting for more than a quarter of the world's population, rural women continue to face persistent barriers and discrimination that keep them out of decision-making processes at all levels undermining their economic independence and their agency. Women's roles in rural Iraq are frequently undervalued or, worse, invisible, despite their significant contribution. Due to prevalent customs and traditions, women are often left out and behind when compared to men. Women not only have a high rate of illiteracy, but they also lack access to assets, resources, and services.

When asked about her experience working with FAO and the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture, Dhuhaa stated: "Hope came one morning knocking at our door. They knew about our story and about what had happened to us during the conflict, so they decided to help us to re-establish our economic activity, by providing us with green fodder grown on the land near Mosul. Thanks to this fodder, buffaloes started producing more milk. The project also provides us with the necessary equipment that we need to turn the milk into Al-Qimar and yoghurt. They also assisted us in restoring our small kitchen and converting it into a dairy production workshop. This will save me and reduce my workload, and the production will be safer and of better quality than before."

Sheep Yoghurt (Laban), is very popular over Iraq.

Dhuhaa is one of 2 000 women benefitting from the project interventions, aimed to support dairy production through the provision of stainless steel dairy equipment for milk handling, storage, processing and marketing. The project has also rehabilitated 35 small/medium milk collection, processing and marketing units.

The provision of appropriate inputs and supplies goes hand-in-hand with capacity building and technical assistance. The outcome of the project is not only to improve and increase dairy production, but also to create job opportunities at the village level and provide consumers with higher- quality products.

**Contributed by:** Bahjet Warsoun Rahou, Media services MOA Nineveh Directorate and Dr. Chedly Kayouli, FAO International Livestock Expert, FAO Iraq.

## Strengthening rural women's businesses skills in Lebanon

Recognizing that specific support is required to enhance women's business and managerial skills, alongside with their technical capacities, FAO organized a capacity development programme on business planning and management, in collaboration with the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture.

The program, which was organized around 22 online sessions, involved 577 women and 44 men from 261 different cooperatives and informal groups. Business planning, market analysis, operational and financial planning, risk management, environmental, social responsibility, and monitoring and action plan development, were among the topics covered in the courses.

During the CBS training as part of Raedat El Rif project.

The online sessions were developed in line with the Cooperative Business Schools (CBS), a training approach developed by FAO, based on the Farmer Field Schools' curriculum, to strengthen the capacities of women's cooperatives, associations and groups, and help them to acquire the entrepreneurial and management skills needed to establish and run a profitable business in the agriculture sector.

The concept of Cooperative Business Schools shifts the focus of the training away from production and toward better farm management and profitability. Participants will develop their business plans as a follow-up to the training they received, with the assistance and supervision of trained facilitators. Around 150 business plans will be chosen to receive additional support for implementation, such as cash grants and vouchers.

The initiative is part of the project "*Support to Women's Cooperatives and Associations in the Agri-food Sector in Lebanon*", funded by the Government of Canada and implemented in coordination with the General Directorate of Agriculture and General Directorate of Cooperatives under the Ministry of Agriculture.

This project supports 270 women's cooperatives, associations and informal groups with specific training on gender equality and soft skills, like communication, negotiation, and ethics. In parallel, the project also aims to strengthen the capacity of the General Directorate of Cooperatives to improve its business processes and operational modalities, and thus enhance the services provided to the cooperatives.

**Contributed by:** Elite Shehadeh Sfeir, Communications Consultant, reviewed by MarieLouise Hayek, Programme Assistant and Gender Focal Point, FAO Lebanon.

## A new FAO-UN WOMEN project just launched in Morocco to support women in artisanal fisheries

All along the coasts in Morocco, women fulfill a crucial role in the fisheries sector, particularly in artisanal and small-scale fisheries. Women are responsible for numerous tasks that not only make them key players, especially in post-harvesting activities, but also fundamental to their livelihoods and food security. For many Moroccan women, fishing, farming seaweed and harvesting seafood serve as the only source of livelihoods. For some of them, engaging in fisheries is a choice; for many others a necessity. But the situation is evolving.

The country, in fact, has been implementing several national initiatives to strengthen women's role in the fisheries sector, such as, for example, the Programme for the Economic Empowerment of Women and the Valorization of Women's Work in the Fisheries Sector, on which the Moroccan Maritime Fisheries Department is committed since the 2000s.

These initiatives are also aligning with the directions of HM King Mohammed VI and the core objectives of "Programme National Intégré d'Autonomisation Economique des Femmes et des Filles (PNIAEF) à l'horizon 2030", also known as "Morocco-Attamkine".

It is in this context that FAO and UN Women just launched a new project, aimed to support women to become stronger economic actors in the fisheries value chain in three specific regions (El Jadida, Safi and Chtouka-Ait Baha) with the ultimate purpose to both ensure their food security and a more sustainable management of fisheries resources. FAO and UN Women will implement the project thanks to funds received from the Government of Japan (USD 356 509), in close collaboration with the Moroccan Maritime Fisheries Department of the Ministry of Agriculture.

During the CBS training as part of Raedat El Rif project.

Through capacity building, the establishment of cooperatives and improved access to modern technologies, this one-year project is expected to benefit about 650 women in the regions on the Atlantic coast, where economic activities have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Contributed by:** Lina Touri, Communication Expert, FAO Morocco.

## Acknowledgements

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A special recognition to Huda Alsahi, Junior Professional Officer in the Inclusive Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division (ESP), who contributed to the editing of the stories. Thanks should be extended to all the Gender Focal Points for their efforts on gathering the stories and sharing them with us.

**For comments and suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact Valentina.Franchi@fao.org**

## Coming soon: the RNE gender capacity development programme

This online programme will be articulated around short and specific modules, delivered on a regular basis (every three weeks). It is open to all FAO staff interested in strengthening their knowledge and capacities to promote gender equality and women's empowerment as an integral part of their work.

The sessions will be facilitated by the Gender Experts in RNE, with the support of other colleagues or experts, based on the topic under discussion. They will be always held both in English and French, and include practical and group exercises, tailored as much as possible to the needs and the reality of the region.

Don't miss the first session on key gender concepts and definitions planned for April 27th: words are important! We will also discuss how best to translate key terms and concepts in French and Arabic, too.

For information about the programme, please contact Maggie.Refaat@fao.org

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**Contact information:**
FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa
Email: FAO-RNE@fao.org
Website: http://www.fao.org/neareast/en/
**Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations**
Cairo, Egypt

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