RNE staff celebrate International Women’s Day


Employees wore purple, as a symbolic gesture and in solidarity to the cause, and gathered in the office to reflect on progress made on gender equality and women’s empowerment in the region and within FAO. The occasion was an opportunity to discuss the gaps that still remain, and outline the way forward.

Following opening remarks from Abdessalam Ould Ahmed, FAO Assistant Director-General and NENA Regional Representative, staff engaged in an interactive game to test their knowledge on International Women’s Day – a creative way to increase their knowledge of the day and its purpose.

The celebration was attended by guest of honor Dr. Maha El-Saeed, Cairo University Professor and founder of the Cairo University Anti-Harassment Unit, who provided an informative presentation on the status of women in the region based on findings of the Beijing +25-review report and the work still needed to achieve gender equality. The focus shifted on gender parity and gender equality in the workplace.
The Regional Gender Officer, Clara Mi Young Park, shared highlights from the FAO performance data on gender parity based on the UN System Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality report.

The presentation was followed by a panel discussion with female staff members across different categories, ages and nationalities, who shared about their experience in the UN system and FAO focusing on lessons learned and practical advice on work-life balance, career development, mentorship and buddy system.

On the occasion, the RNE ADG recalled the DG’s initiatives to promote gender equality in all areas of FAO’s work and gender equality and parity and a harmonious work environment free from all forms of harassment in house and announced the establishment of a regional Women’s Committee to contribute to FAO’s efforts in this direction.

Did you know?

In 1909, the Socialist Party of America, organized a National Women’s Day for the first time. A year later, at the International Socialist Women’s Conference in Copenhagen, International Women’s Day was officially established to honour the women’s rights movement and build support for universal suffrage.

Every year on March 8, people all over the world celebrate this day to observe the social, political, economic, and cultural achievements of women and to reflect on current situation.

Contributed by: Nada Ismail, Communication Specialist, with inputs from Mariam Hassanein, Corporate and Media Relations Specialist, FAO RNE, and Clara Park, RNE Regional Gender Officer

Improving Household Food and Nutrition Security in Egypt. A story of Soumaya in Aswan

Soumaya, a mother of three who lives in Aswan, heard about the Community Nutrition Kitchen for the first time from her best friend Nassra who is very socially active in her community – Edfu. Nassra was the community leader that FAO relied on to mobilize women and youth to participate in the Italian funded project “Improving Household Food and Nutrition Security in Egypt.”

One of the interventions was the Community Nutrition Kitchen where women learn how to prepare healthy meals and use traditional recipes that have been modified to have higher nutritional values. Nutrition messages adapted to the local context are shared in a friendly manner and through the participation of women, disseminated to families, relatives and neighbors.

Women also acquire knowledge on meal planning and budgeting and food storage strategies in a participatory way. Moreover, women gain hands-on knowledge of home processing techniques, food safety and healthy diets using the fruits and vegetables harvested from the field or grown in the backyard.

Soumaya participated in more than 30 training sessions on nutritious cooking and food processing. She has been applying what she learned. She likes baking especially desserts. Soumaya uses the nutritional tips that she learned and produces healthy bakery products as well as teaches what she has learnt to her relatives and neighbors, especially newly wedded brides and young girls who are about to get married.

Improving Household Food and Nutrition Security in Egypt. A story of Soumaya in Aswan

From left to right – Nassra, Soumaya, Fatima and a representative from the Agricultural Directorate in Beni Sueif at a Nutrition Festival during the World Food 2019 Celebrations.

Her son shared her bakes with his friends at school. Having liked them very much, they asked him to get more. This inspired Soumaya to make this a business. Then she shied away from the idea because her son felt that it would not be appropriate. Nevertheless, Soumaya still intends to do some sort of business. “I feel proud of the knowledge I now have and wish to be able to help all the young women in Aswan,” said Soumaya confidently.

Contributed by: Rawya Eldabi, Communication Expert, FAO Egypt

Upgrading the Technical Agriculture Education System in Lebanon
“Upgrading the Technical Agriculture Education System in Lebanon” is a project led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Started in 2016, the project is implemented in partnership with UNICEF, ILO, Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI), Welfare Association for Research and Development (WARD), and the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture.

The project aims to enhance the employability of young Lebanese and displaced Syrians. Its main objective is to upgrade the technical agricultural education system through revising and improving the schools’ curricula and institutional arrangements. The project also offers youth the opportunity to acquire the necessary technical skills to access career opportunities in agriculture and agribusiness in Lebanon or, in the case of displaced young people, in Syria upon their return.

Under the project, young women and men can benefit from improved agricultural technical vocational training and enrollment in the Lebanese public 3-year secondary-level technical degree programme of the Technical Baccalaureate in Agriculture (BTA) offered at the Agricultural Technical Schools (ATS) of the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA).

The project targets 525 students, aged 15-20, to enroll in the 3-year BT program; 1,848 students, aged 14-25, for the non-formal or the short-term vocational training courses, and 100 teachers to benefit from a refresher training on agriculture and curriculum development following Competency Based Training (CBT) and decent work.

New sex-disaggregated data efforts in skill development: “What does not get measured remains invisible in policy planning”

Gender analysis informed the formulation and implementation of the project. The team also designed a gender-responsive log frame using sex-disaggregated and gender data. This gender lens helps the project to transform gender roles and enhance women’s participation in agricultural production, processing and trade through skills development.

The aim is to increase women’s access to formal and non-formal training in agriculture by ensuring that training delivery is inclusive, labour market-oriented and income enhancing. All this is expected to support the creation of a strengthened gender-responsive and better quality technical agricultural education system.

Students during the technical vocational training.

**Strengthening institutions to become gender responsive**

The project also promoted women’s equal participation and leadership in policy reform and curriculum review positions and or process. The share of female members in the course and curriculum review committees was 68 percent of the total. The school management and operation regulations were also updated through the adoption of gender sensitive language, affirmative action addressing gender disparities for both teachers and students, and the promotion of gender sensitive attitudes and behavior among school staff. Furthermore, men and women are ensured equal opportunities for professional development, trainings and positions on school committees and boards.

Students too are provided with equal opportunities within the learning environment (e.g. laboratories, agricultural machineries, IT labs, teaching equipment) and placement in work-based learning (WBL) which can take different forms including informal and formal apprenticeship. Access to suitable boarding facilities (e.g. bathrooms) is available for female students.

**Mainstreaming gender across the curricula and teaching methods**

Awareness sessions were also organized for teachers to encourage the adoption of a gender-sensitive attitude in teaching delivery methods. Gender issues were taken into account during review process of the 99 course new curriculum. The purpose, description, goals and objectives of each course were reviewed for gender responsiveness, including the integration of gender-sensitive perspectives, gender sensitive language, images and writings and avoidance of gender stereotypes (e.g., he/she in English/Arabic language, photos of females and males).

**Reduced gender gaps in enrollment, completion, and learning outcomes**

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1. FAO (2019). Sex-disaggregated data in agriculture and sustainable resource management New approaches for data collection and analysis pp V.
The project tailored the logistics and course offers for the non-formal training to the specific needs of both young female and male participants. The flexible course modality (diversified subjects and scheduling) respecting the youth’s interest and the labor market needs led to increased youth’s participation. The classwork location was moved closer for the youngsters residing far away from the schools so to increase female participation of both Lebanese and displaced Syrian youth. Collective transportation was also provided to overcome impediments to join classes.

The total number of trainees reached 2,016, of whom 60 percent girls. The participation of non-Lebanese displaced youth was 34 percent of the total. Non-formal education was also offered with course modules covering occupational safety and hazards, basic functional literacy and numeracy in agriculture, entrepreneurial and life skills modules alongside technical hands-on trainings and prior youth outreach and orientation sessions on market requirement. The formal program (BTA) now comprises 55 percent female students.

**Batoul’s Story**

Batoul during her work at a flower shop.

Batoul is a displaced Syrian woman who flew from her country to look for an opportunity to study at one of the ATS. She started by enrolling in the non-formal trainings on landscape, beekeeping and flower arrangement. The trainings provided her with hands-on skill development, which further encouraged her to enroll in the formal BTA program. “I advise youth to enroll in the Technical Agriculture Schools as they will learn a lot and gain new experiences to become ready to join the labor market”, said Batoul. Batoul is now working at a local flower shop and aspires to open her own shop once she returns to her homeland.

**WARD is a non-profit Lebanese organization focusing on research and development is education in Lebanon and MENA region.**

**Contributed by:** Abir Abulkhoudoud, International Consultant for agriculture technical education, FAO Syria, reviewed by Elite Choueiri, Communication Consultant and Etienne Careme, Resilience and Liaison Officer, FAO Lebanon

**Gender-sensitive “Cash for Work program” enhances the potential of farming families for poverty reduction and food security in Iraq**

**Anoud Abdullah Azeeda**

Anoud lives in Bir-Okla village in Rabaa district with her four children - two sons and two daughters. As the head of her household, she must provide for her family. Her eldest daughter stitches dresses to contribute some income and ensure they can meet their basic needs.

When the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) controlled the area, the family moved to a camp where they had to stay more than one year despite the harsh conditions. Once Bir-Okla was liberated, the family returned to their village; however, their home and land was badly damaged and their assets (i.e. tools and furniture) were looted. Anoud started rebuilding the house, but struggled to resume agriculture activities and restore the land due to soil salinity resulting from water scarcity and poor irrigation practices. With Cash for Work, she began rehabilitating her land to grow seasonal vegetables, such as okra, chard and radish.

Anoud recalls that she “worked for 20 days and prepared land through the Cash for Work program. Specific activities were identified for women in our village, who normally cannot participate in canal cleaning. This work allowed us
to earn money and repair this piece of land. I received 468,600 IQD (400 USD), which I spent on home repairs, winter clothes and several weeks of food”. Anoud is motivated to restore additional parts of her land for cultivation and grow seasonal vegetables as a source of livelihood.

Maha Jasmin Mohammed - CfW Beneficiary

After 25 months of displacement, Maha returned to Azaim, a village in Rabea sub-district. Maha and her child fled in 2015 after her husband was killed by ISIL after attempting to help a Yazidi girl who had escaped captivity. “Sometimes I cry when I recall those terrible days,” she says. Prior to the crisis, they were small-scale farmers, growing seasonal vegetables. Due to the crisis, she lost her source of income and became the sole provider of the family. Upon returning to the village after the liberation, her family faced tremendous difficulties in rebuilding their agriculture-based livelihoods. In particular, the Al Jazeera irrigation system had been severely damaged upon ISIL’s retreat in 2017. In order to access water, Maha dug a well; however, that exhausted all their savings and now she occasionally has to borrow money from relatives to meet their immediate needs.

Maha heard that FAO was launching a Cash for Work (CfW) assistance program for vulnerable and poor families, including female-headed households and unemployed persons. In addition to the regular canal cleaning work, FAO provided CfW activities related to backyard garden rehabilitation to ensure women could participate in a culturally acceptable manner.

Maha worked for 20 days, preparing a 50m² piece of land and began growing cucumbers, eggplants and tomatoes. She received $400 (USD) through Mobile Money, which she spent on food, winter clothes and home repairs. Due to the seasonality of her agriculture livelihood, she has requested additional CfW opportunities.

“Cash for Work (CfW) provides a necessary, short-term source of income as well as providing equal opportunities to men and women”

Contributed by: Lubna Tarabishy, International Monitoring & Evaluation Specialist, FAO Iraq

Stepping towards what comes after success

Living in Al Aqrabanya village in the northern area of the West Bank near Nablus city, Iman spent most of her life within a community that relies on agriculture as their main source of income. Her family consists of two married sisters, a married brother, and Iman who is single and lives with her parents. In her community, being responsible for the land is a task shared amongst all family members despite what else they might be doing in their lives. Iman started planting and harvesting her family’s land when she was still a student, joining the rest of the family on the land, either before or after class.

After receiving a BA degree in Elementary Education, Iman worked as a teacher for three years, while also maintaining her main role as a farmer. Being a person who is able to see the potential in everything and everyone around her, in 2010, Iman and other women in the village founded a women’s association, consisting of tens of female members from Al Aqrabanya village.

In 2011, the association was officially registered with the relevant state authorities, and its scope of work was mainly selling Tatreez (Palestinian embroidery). Later on, and to expand their scope of work, Iman established connections with a local NGO and received thyme seedlings to generate an additional source of income for the association. Thyme later became the main product and source of income for most members of the associations.

Since 2018, FAO has been providing in kind and technical support to the association including the construction of a packinghouse as part of the project “Supporting economic growth through optimized agricultural value chains in the West Bank” funded by the Government of Canada. Before the construction of this house, the women used to lose a significant amount of their production because they had no place to keep and protect the produce from rain and heat which damaged especially the leafy vegetables and herbs such as parsley, spinach, and others.
The packinghouse is benefiting the association and its members in different ways: Iman arranges capacity-building activities for her fellow colleagues to enhance the quality of their production; those women who have babies can still make it to work since there is a shelter for breastfeeding. This allows the association to eliminate production losses that approximated around 30 percent before the construction of the packinghouse.

As a result, in 2019, the association was able to sell products totally worth USD 14,500 - the highest profit they have been able to achieve since the start of their business. Additionally, FAO has supported the cooperative with seedlings of different kinds of vegetables, which enabled them to increase their production, revenues, and widen their scope of work.

Recently, Iman talked to us about the working-culture that she has built within the members of the association: “We are all actively working together, flexible so to enable all women who want to participate, and we are supportive of each other; that’s why we are growing!” She also explained how teachers who are also members of the association and work as farmers come to the land to work in packing after they finish classes, and how they watch each other’s kids when their mothers are busy working.

“Back when I started talking to my family about my intention to start a women’s association, they did not think it was going to be feasible and would only be a headache, but look at us now!” she told us. After she has proved the power of this group of women working together, Iman has received the support of everyone around her; her mother is an active member of the association, and her father helps when his health condition allow him to do so.

Today, Iman leads approximately 50 women whom are all engaged in farming, most of these women are active in their community and creating a positive impact as daughters, mothers, wives, sisters, and teachers. She walks for an hour every day to get to and from work, then usually spends eleven hours in the land; Iman also arranges her meetings also in the packing house to stay efficient, trains her colleagues on how to enhance production, and what is more important is that she is not done yet.

In February 2020, we asked her about her plans and ambitions for the future, she had a long and specific answer as an entrepreneur and a leader, “I want to start a special organic market for the association where people can come pick their vegetables. I also want to have more time to be able to handle marketing internally; I have a lot of ideas and I will put them into action when I have the time and resources.”

The project that supported Iman has also given an opportunity for hundreds of other women within 15 women cooperatives who were supported by FAO by linking them to the market, equipping them with the needed resources and capacity building to enhance their production. These women are all blooming into teaching their communities how to have faith in yourself and teach others to have faith in you.

Women’s expectations voiced to FAO in a field visit to Deir El Ahmar

Twenty five members and representatives of various women cooperatives and groups from different locations in the Western-Baalbeck region attended a meeting organized by the FAO Lebanon at the Women’s Association Center in Deir El Ahmar in the presence of the FAO Representative in Lebanon, Dr. Maurice Saade, and representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, the Embassy of Canada in Lebanon and Global Affairs – Canada.

The meeting aimed to create space for women to share aspirations and expectations about their participation in the Canada-funded project “Support to Women’s Cooperatives and Associations in the Agri-food Sector in Lebanon known as the “Raedat El Rif” project”.

Each group of participants brought its flagship artisanal products such as jams, dried fruits, medicinal plants, etc. Some of these products were traditional ones; others had been processed and transformed innovatively such as for example watermelon syrup and chestnut jams. The women enthusiastically exchanged recipes and tips before the discussion started.
Implemented by FAO in collaboration with the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture, the project aims to support women’s cooperatives and associations by promoting a social and cultural environment that enables women’s economic empowerment while also increasing the opportunity for women to establish or expand agri-food income-generating enterprises and participate in the local economy. The project is expected to complete its activities in 2021, working with women’s cooperatives and associations in all regions of Lebanon.

“The business landscape is attracting more and more women in Lebanon,” said Dalia Shehadeh, from Mazrait Beit Slaiby. “We want to work to sustain our families,” she added. For Dounia El Khoury, Head of Women’s Association of Deir El Ahmar (WADA), enhancing marketing opportunities and integration at both national and international levels is key in the FAO project. Najwa El Hussein, from Shmestar, a chemistry graduate, carries out tests to control the quality of her organic products and has offered to share her knowledge and quality control services with the participants. From his side, Mohamad Fawaz who is working with Najwa stresses the importance of improving the members’ practical know-how and introducing new ideas and technology in the women cooperatives businesses. The participants shared a warm meal prepared by the Women’s Association of Deir Al Ahmar before heading back home with many ideas to explore within the framework of the “Raedat El Rif” project.

Contributed by: Elite Choueiri, Communication Consultant, reviewed by MarieLouise Hayek, Programme Assistant and Gender Focal Point, and Maurice Saade, FAO Representative, FAO Lebanon

FAO events in the NENA Region

- In October 2019, FAO Algeria joined the celebrations of International Day of Rural Women organized by National Cell Femmes ‘Rural Women’. Rural women from four different provinces attended the event. Many were honoured for their efforts in agriculture activities by the Minister of Agriculture and FAO Representative in Algeria.

- FAO Mauritania celebrated World Food Day 2019 under the theme "Acting for the future. Healthy food for a Zero Hunger world" by organizing a mini-fair for rural women. Women from cooperatives from various regions participated in the mini-fair displaying their different products, sharing information and networking among themselves.