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Integrating Gender Equality into Agri-SME Competitiveness

Advancing Gender-Transformative Practices in Lebanon's Agri-Food Sector

Overview

- This case study documents how the ILO Bouzour Project integrated gender equality into efforts to strengthen the resilience and competitiveness of agri-food small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Lebanon. Implemented in partnership with the QOOT Agri-Food Cluster, the initiative demonstrated that competitiveness and inclusion are not separate objectives but mutually reinforcing drivers of sustainable markets.
- By combining gender-sensitive training, organizational coaching, and participatory assessment tools, the intervention helped partners and SMEs translate gender equality from awareness into practice — embedding it within market systems, business models, and workplace cultures. The experience offers practical lessons for applying a gender-transformative approach within the ILO's Approach to Inclusive Market Systems (AIMS) and for advancing decent work through private-sector engagement.

From Competitiveness to Inclusion: The Rationale

In Lebanon's economy, the agriculture and agri-food sectors remain both a lifeline and a challenge. Agriculture accounts for barely 1.4% of GDP and 3.8% of formal employment,¹ yet provides income for about 30- 40% of the population². Beneath these figures lies a complex reality: high informality, limited access to finance, and persistent gender inequalities. Women perform nearly half of all agricultural labour, but most work without contracts, protection, or recognition. Only 7% of rural women own land, and barely 5% access agricultural loans.

In most cooperatives, women's participation is visible but not influential.³

Markets, like societies, mirror the power dynamics within them. When women's work remains undervalued, the system itself becomes less efficient, less competitive, and less resilient. Recognizing this, the [ILO Bouzour Project](#) works to reimagine how market systems can be both inclusive and productive. Guided by the [Approach to Inclusive Market Systems \(AIMS\)](#), Bouzour seeks to strengthen local markets by ensuring that both women and men can access opportunities, skills, and decent work on equal terms.

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1 World Bank, 2021: Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction

2 FAO, 2021: Role of women in agriculture in Lebanon - Briefing note

3 Ibid

AIMS rests on two essential conditions: the existence of viable market opportunities, and the ability of people to seize them. But access to opportunities is never gender-neutral. Women's mobility, education, care responsibilities, and social norms often restrict their economic participation — weakening not only their prospects but the entire market's potential. For this reason, Bouzour integrates gender equality at the very core of its market development logic.

To operationalize this, the project applies a tiered approach to gender programming that evolves from awareness, to responsiveness, to transformation. A gender-aware intervention raises consciousness of

Box 1. Strengthening Agri-Food Value Chains

To strengthen Lebanon's agri-food sector, the ILO and QOOT Cluster launched the initiative "Supporting Agri-SMEs in Addressing Supply Chain Disruptions and Enhancing Market Access". This initiative is part of the ILO Bouzour project, funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), and the PROSPECTS programme, funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Targeted interventions helped SMEs overcome supply chain bottlenecks, reconnect with alternative sources of raw materials, and strengthen their operations. At the same time, farmers receive technical support to upgrade their production practices and improve quality to meet processor requirements.

At the heart of the initiative is contract farming. This model strengthens supply chains, improves market linkages, and offers farmers greater security while providing processors with a reliable flow of high-quality produce.

By shifting away from unstable wholesale markets, the intervention reduces food loss and costs for farmers, cuts transport emissions, and ensures processors steady access to local inputs. This approach is fostering long-term trust across value chains and laying the groundwork for a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable agrifood sector in Lebanon.



Roula Sayegh, owner of Natura Spoon, participating company.
(© Natura Spoon)

disparities and biases; a gender-responsive one adapts systems and practices to close those gaps; a gender-transformative approach goes further — challenging the norms and power relations that perpetuate inequality.

Within this framework, the intervention conducted in partnership with the QOOT Cluster became a laboratory for inclusive innovation. Designed to strengthen SME competitiveness and resilience in the wake of overlapping crises, it became an entry point to demonstrate that market competitiveness and gender equality are not separate goals — they are interdependent enablers of each other.

Bringing Gender into Business Practice

Within this intervention, QOOT Cluster, Lebanon's leading agri-food innovation consortium, serves as both the implementing partner and a key stakeholder driving local engagement. Its members, spanning SMEs, processors, and exporters, share a commitment to modernizing the sector and positioning it for regional and international growth.

The gender mainstreaming component aimed not to redirect the project's focus but to complement it — ensuring that the push for competitiveness and innovation would also promote equality, decent work, and inclusive growth.

QOOT had already integrated gender awareness into its operations. Its outreach strategies deliberately sought to engage women-led SMEs and processors, ensuring their representation in project activities. In this project's

recruitment round, nearly fifty women-led SMEs were contacted directly to guarantee inclusivity. Likewise, gender balance was woven into its selection criteria for SME support, where “gender distribution in board and leadership roles” represented a measurable component of evaluation.

These efforts reflected a genuine gender-aware and gender-responsive orientation: a recognition that women’s participation may enhance innovation, collaboration, and resilience across value chains. The ILO therefore did not aim to introduce gender equality as a new topic, but to deepen and consolidate QOOT’s existing practices within a systemic framework — one that connects gender inclusion with market sustainability.

Through tailored training, QOOT staff and member SMEs explored the links between labour rights, decent work, responsible business conduct (RBC), and the business case for gender equality, and prevention of sexual harassment. These topics were chosen precisely because they resonate with QOOT’s mission: promoting fair, high-performing enterprises that are both economically viable and socially responsible. The training invited participants to connect international standards with local realities, asking what decent work means in small agrifood enterprises, and

It was during the gender session that I felt recognized for my work and effort. It was particularly meaningful.

► **Woman farmer participant, Mount Lebanon**

how equitable workplaces can strengthen supply chains and reduce turnover.

This foundation led to a new gender inclusion module in the capacity building activities with farmers. Gender equality was treated as a lens for improving coordination, productivity, and trust between farmers and SMEs.

At the partner level, QOOT was already gender-aware and responsive; and with this training they had more tools and information to intentionally embed gender considerations into its training models and institutional culture.

The SME Gender Assessment and Coaching: A Dialogue, Not an Audit

The Gender Assessment and Coaching process engaged participating SMEs in a dialogue about how gender equality intersects with competitiveness, and to



Farmer Mahmoud Zeitouni in El Kalaa
(Elie Mansour, © ILO, 2025)

encourage SME leaders to see themselves as agents of change.

Rather than auditing or benchmarking, the process sought to create a safe space for reflection, using data as a tool to guide decisions. The assessment provided an overview of workforce composition, governance dynamics, explored existing policies on equal pay, parental leave, sexual harassment prevention and flexible work arrangements, and examined retention and promotion patterns.

SMEs in Lebanon operate under immense strain as they navigate supply disruptions, inflation, and workforce instability. The assessment invited entrepreneurs to reflect on their own practices and recognize that they hold the power to shape gender-equitable workplaces. The process prompted introspection: Do we hire fairly? Do we understand how family responsibilities affect our staff? Do our policies exist on paper or in practice?

Individual coaching sessions helped SMEs interpret their results and turn insight into action. These one-on-one exchange allowed participants to move beyond defensiveness and toward genuine engagement. One manager, initially resistant to the idea of a “gender survey,” later admitted that the process was an opportunity to learn how to build a workplace where people stay because they feel respected.

Participants came to view gender equality as a business issue. When women are excluded from management, innovation and the quality of decisions decline. Unclear parental leave policies lead to higher staff turnover. Unaddressed harassment erodes trust and productivity.

The process concluded with a focus on male allies for gender equality. In many Lebanese SMEs, as elsewhere

in the region, men still occupy most leadership roles and their engagement is essential. The session invited them to view allyship as a leadership responsibility: to recognize bias, to advocate for equitable practices, and to create workplaces where care, fairness, and performance coexist. This marked the first steps toward gender-transformative practice — where equality becomes part of business culture, not just compliance.

Shifting Mindsets and Building Allies: Early Results and Insights

By combining partner-level and stakeholder-level engagement, the intervention achieved change at multiple layers of the system — precisely the kind of systemic reach envisioned by AIMS.

At the partner level, QOOT emerged as a more gender-responsive organization. The gender inclusion module it integrated into its farmer training has since become a permanent feature, ensuring that future capacity-building touches upon key topics relevant to women workers and producers. Staff now articulate gender equality as an element of responsible business conduct — a sign that the learning moved beyond awareness into institutionalization. By influencing how farmer training is designed and delivered, QOOT is helping to ensure that market opportunities exist in forms that women can realistically access.

At the stakeholder level, SMEs began to perceive gender equality as an asset, not a cost. Many recognized that their internal policies existed informally, lacking documentation or accountability. The coaching process prompted them to formalize procedures, collect sex-disaggregated data, and review recruitment and promotion practices. These changes are not merely internal reforms; they strengthen SMEs' capacity to engage and retain a diverse workforce — directly addressing the second condition of AIMS: ensuring that people, including women, have the ability to seize market opportunities when they arise. The introduction of male allyship further shifted the narrative, positioning equality as a collective responsibility and a marker of effective leadership.

At the community level, farmers, both men and women, reported greater recognition of women's roles in production and decision-making. For some, the gender inclusion sessions delivered by QOOT were the first time their contributions were publicly acknowledged. This shift in perception is modest but profound: it begins to dismantle the social norms that restrict women's visibility and agency within rural economies, making inclusion part of how value chains function rather than an afterthought.

The process revealed several enduring lessons. First, competitiveness and inclusion are mutually reinforcing: enterprises that respect and empower their workers perform better and endure longer. Second, multi-level

engagement ensures sustainability: when partners like QOOT institutionalize gender equality, their influence cascades through entire supply chains. Third, change begins with reflection: individual coaching and dialogue are catalysts for transformation, enabling businesses and communities to question who gets to participate in growth and why.

Taken together, these outcomes show how gender mainstreaming can make market systems more equitable and more efficient. By helping women access the same opportunities as men and by supporting market actors to recognize the value of doing so, the initiative demonstrates that inclusive systems are stronger systems.

Box 2: SME Spotlight: The Case of Parsare SARL (Ayadina)

Among the participating SMEs, Parsare SARL (Ayadina) vividly demonstrate gender equality and business viability can reinforce each other. A second-generation, female-led enterprise, Parsare was founded with a clear purpose: to preserve Lebanon's culinary heritage while creating dignified, stable employment for women. Rooted in the art of traditional food preservation, the company produces gourmet pantry items that blend age-old recipes with modern techniques — carrying forward a legacy of craftsmanship and cultural pride.

Long before the ILO intervention, Ayadina had already embedded equality into its structure. With an all-women workforce and a strong focus on formal contracts, flexibility, and care-conscious work arrangements, the company demonstrates that gender-sensitive practices not only uphold fairness but can strengthen productivity, retention, and overall competitiveness, even in small enterprises. Its experience challenges the perception that only large or well-resourced companies can afford to prioritize inclusion.

While Parsare's achievements are its own, they echo the message that this coaching process aimed to reinforce across the cluster: that intentional design, not enterprise size, determines inclusivity. By aligning its business model with the values of fairness and cultural stewardship, Parsare demonstrates that gender equality is not only compatible with resilience and profitability, but can be a source of both.

ILO Project Background

The ILO Building Inclusive Markets and Decent Work for Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Host Communities (BOUZOUR) project, funded by Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), focuses on developing key agricultural and agri-food value chains with potential for decent job creation to improve livelihoods of both Lebanese and Syrian population groups in Lebanon.

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