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Improve Your Agri Business (IYAB) Training as a Pathway to Women's Entrepreneurship in Agriculture

Rethinking Inclusion in a Changing Agricultural Landscape

Lebanon's agricultural sector provides essential livelihoods for vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees, yet entrenched gender norms continue to limit women's access to training, markets, and decision-making. At the same time, small farmers and agri-businesses often lack the capacity to manage their operations effectively. Without record-keeping, cost calculation, or business planning, investment decisions are often made by intuition, restricting productivity, income growth, and the adoption of improved technologies.

The [ILO BOUZOUR project](#), funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) addresses these dual challenges by combining gender-responsive approaches with the ILO's "Improve Your Agri-Business" (IYAB) training, part of the global Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) programme. IYAB helps farmers and small agri-businesses manage their businesses more effectively. But training alone is not enough, to be effective, it must be inclusive, responsive to real needs and sensitive to the different ways men and women experience the economy.

This case study highlights two steps the project has taken to close this gap: strengthening trainer capacity to create more inclusive learning environments, and supporting pilot women's networks that give women space to connect, lead, and reshape their roles in agricultural markets.

Two local partner institutions, Neopreneur and Food Heritage Foundation (FHF), have led the delivery of IYAB training to hundreds of participants. As part of the BOUZOUR project, they worked to ensure safe, inclusive learning spaces and follow-up support systems that reflect the realities of rural farmers—helping transform training into lasting impact.



Ashwak Abed Al Rahman Hammouda, IYAB participant from the Neopreneur co-hort © ILO.

Ashwak shifts from home-based doubt to confident entrepreneur

In Mouhamara, Ashwak Abed Al Rahman Hammouda joined the IYAB training carrying more than the usual challenges of a home-based producer. Living with a disability had often made her doubt her abilities and although she produced high-quality goods, she lacked the confidence and tools to present her work professionally. Throughout the IYAB training, Ashwak discovered not only new techniques but an entirely new sense of self-belief. The learning materials became her daily reference, offering clarity and direction. What began as a simple desire to “learn more” evolved into a transformative experience that reshaped how she viewed her business and her own capabilities. Today, Ashwak proudly promotes her products, applies improved production and marketing techniques and speaks of the training as the moment she gained both practical skills and the confidence to stand behind her business.

Making training spaces inclusive: from awareness to action

Access to training alone is not enough. For participation to be meaningful, sessions must be inclusive and responsive to the different ways men and women experience the economy. The project adopted a tiered approach to gender inclusion: moving from awareness, to responsiveness, to transformation.

To ensure the training programme became accessible and meaningful for women, a dedicated capacity-building workshop was designed for trainers. The workshop helped trainers reflect on their own facilitation approaches and understand how gender roles, caregiving responsibilities, literacy levels and cultural norms shape who feels able to participate, and how to adapt facilitation methods that foster equal participation.

To support this, a practical Inclusive Training Checklist was introduced. The checklist provided concrete guidance to trainers on how to embed inclusivity before, during, and after each training session. It covered everything from how to schedule sessions to accommodate caregiving

responsibilities, to how to create welcoming and respectful group dynamics in the room.



Nada Hussein Al Khatib, IYAB participant from the Neopreneur co-hort © ILO.

Nada rebuilds her business and rediscovers her strength

At 60 years old, Nada Hussein Al Khatib, known in her community for her handmade tahini paste and peanut butter, found her livelihood disrupted by the war, leaving her financially and emotionally adrift. Determined to rebuild, she joined the IYAB training with Neopreneur, where sessions on costing and bookkeeping transformed the way she managed her production. For the first time, she accurately calculated her costs, kept clear records and understood the true value of her work. With confidence and a stronger business foundation, Nada revived her production, began planning for expansion and regained the sense of purpose she thought she had lost.

From inclusion to leadership: planting the seeds of transformation

Training is a powerful tool, especially when made inclusive but its impact is amplified when women are supported to step into leadership roles. Working closely with Neopreneur and FHF, the project supported the design of women's networks rooted in the IYAB participant groups.

Box 2: Women's Networks at a Glance

Neopreneur has facilitated localized support networks across ten regions, from Akkar and Bekaa to Mount Lebanon, connecting at least 51 women farmers and agri-business owners through regional weekly markets and a national expo, Souk El 10452. These networks have strengthened commercial linkages, improved access to resources, and helped women identify local market opportunities that had previously been out of reach.

At the national level, FHF, in partnership with the Lebanese League for Women in Business, has engaged 66 women participants through participatory workshops. These workshops guided the co-creation of the network's vision and governance structure and laid the groundwork for activities such as knowledge-sharing events, exposure visits, and joint initiatives that support business expansion and visibility.

These networks provide spaces for women to exchange knowledge, share resources, and build visibility as agricultural actors. FHF, in partnership with the Lebanese League for Women in Business (LLWB), explored a national-level peer network combining digital and in-person engagements. Neopreneur is establishing localized networks for women farmers and agri-businesses based in Bekaa, Mount Lebanon and Akkar, offering context-specific spaces for commercial connections, sale opportunities and growth.

Each network is co-developed by the women themselves to ensure sustainability, ownership, and gradual growth. These efforts reflect a move toward gender transformation, where the goal is not just to adapt to existing gender norms, but to change them. For instance,

the women-led networks aim to shift perceptions about women's roles in agriculture, positioning them not only as workers but as decision-makers and business leaders within their communities. By carving out space for women to lead, connect, and organize, the project begins to challenge the traditional image of who belongs in agriculture and who gets to shape its future.

Women rising in rural agri-business: stories of transformation

In the rural landscapes of Akkar, Bekaa and Mount Lebanon, where agriculture is both a livelihood and a cultural anchor, women have always stood at the heart of production. Yet for decades, their work has been confined to the private sphere, performed quietly, often invisibly and rarely recognized as entrepreneurship. The IYAB program opened a window into these women's unseen world and revealed not only the gender-specific barriers rural women face, but also the remarkable transformation possible when those barriers are addressed with intention, empathy and design.

Aisha finds her voice in the digital marketplace

Before the training, Aisha Baliis's online presence was limited to long, unedited videos that garnered little engagement. She lacked confidence, digital skills and reliable internet, barriers common among rural women. But after learning how to create short reels, use voice-overs and present her work professionally, everything changed. A door opened. Her products reached new audiences, she received more orders and for the first time, she saw herself as a business owner, not just a producer. Her story reflects a larger shift: when rural women acquire digital skills, their businesses no longer end at the village border.

Across all regions, a clear pattern emerged: women were never limited by a lack of talent, motivation, or creativity, but rather by insufficient access: access to skills, safe learning spaces, markets and networks. By applying a deliberate gender lens, the program helped dismantle

these barriers through tailored support that met women where they were, respected their time and responsibilities, provided safe and inclusive environments, linked them to viable market channels, strengthened networks that endure beyond the project. The outcome extended far beyond entrepreneurship; it fostered visibility, autonomy, confidence and a sense of collective empowerment. The experiences of these women and many others like them, stand as a testament to the transformative impact of inclusive program design. When initiatives listen to women, adapt to their realities and create genuine pathways to opportunity, women advance with strength, ambition and innovation.



Siham Ghanem, IYAB participant from the FHF co-hort © ILO.

Siham redefines her home-based business

In the Chouf, Siham Ghanem had long produced high-quality goods from her home, but she had no business structure: no costing system, no labels, no pricing strategy. During the coaching sessions, she opened her notebooks and admitted that despite years of work, she had never known how to calculate profit.

With guidance from the IYAB trainer, Siham learned how to cost her products, set prices, and present her products professionally. She began labelling her products and preparing to sell at markets. The transformation was not just technical, it was emotional: now she knows how to present and sell her products with pride.

Digital Doors Opening for Women Producers

In Majdal Anjar and Kemed El Loz, FHF's women-only IYAB trainings created spaces where participants felt safe to speak, voice concerns and learn collectively. What began as quiet, hesitant participation quickly grew into confidence as women shared challenges, experimented with new ideas and supported each other. But the change didn't end in the classroom. Through the creation of a digital marketplace, women accessed online sales channels, sourced inputs, and connected directly with buyers. This combination of safe learning spaces and real market access allowed participants not only to strengthen their skills, but to enter and navigate economic spaces that had long remained out of reach.

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