

Participation through Education:

Empowering Egyptian Women Farmers to Gain a Seat at the Table

**Water Management Reform Programme
Cairo, Egypt**



Submitted by: Nihad Rageh, Hannah Laubenthal

Country Context: Gender Equality in Egypt

From a global and comparative perspective, Egypt does not fare well in regards to gender equality: In the 2014 Human Development Report's Gender Equality Index, which measures gender disparity in the realm of empowerment and economic activity, Egypt takes on the 110th position (out of 187 countries). Accordingly, Egyptian women are only marginally represented in political and labour bodies, and labour force participation rates ranks at a low 26%, compared to 79% of their male counterparts. Concurrently, the Global Gender Gap Index 2015 awards Egypt the 136th rank out of 145.

The root causes of these inequalities stem from societal barriers which prevent Egyptian women from fully engaging in political and economic life. The Egyptian context is characterized by highly discriminatory social structures and institutions, as pointed out in the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index 2014. While Egypt's Constitution of 2014 does enshrine the value of gender equality, reality yet presents itself as rather bleak – the impact of culturally ascribed norms propagated by a highly patriarchal and conservative system is still tangible. These cultural impediments do in turn effect economic resource allocation and women's educational training. While the gender gap in primary education has almost been closed, illiteracy rates are still much higher among women than among their male counterparts: Only 65% of Egyptian women can be counted as literate, compared to 85% of Egyptian males (Gender Gap Index 2015). Given that mothers' literacy levels are heavily linked to their offspring's educational attainments, this deficit is calling for immediate action. Due to these educational shortfalls, women contribute the majority to unpaid family work.

Even more distinct gender disparities can be found in rural areas, i.e. in Lower and Upper Egypt. Illiteracy rates are more pronounced here, and rural youth, in particular rural female youth, are more likely to have never attended school, compared to their urban counterparts. The percentage of female rural youth who have never attended school is twice as high as that of their male equivalents, and their illiteracy presents an obstacle which more often than not jeopardises certain social and economic avenues (UNFPA Survey of Young People in Egypt). Tellingly, rural women present the majority of labour force (93%) in informal employment conditions.

Sector Context: Irrigated Agriculture

Irrigated agriculture is a key sector of the Egyptian economy, providing livelihoods to 55% of the population, and employing one third of the labour force. Egypt heavily depends on irrigation, a factor which directly affects small-scale farmers, who account for 95% of total. Since the 1980s, the migration of male farmers to urban areas in the search for better economic opportunities has tremendously changed the gender division of labour, both on the farms and in the households, thereby increasing tasks and responsibilities of Egyptian women in rural areas, which now include the running of agricultural production and irrigation systems. Women present about 43% of the agricultural labour force and provide most of the unpaid labour on family farms.

Although female farmers have assumed these new responsibilities in a formerly male-dominated domain with bravura, they are still excluded from local water planning as well as management meetings in Water User Organisations (WUO), which remain dominated by male decision-makers. The percentage of effective and actual female participation in WUOs varies from 3-5 % in total, depending on cultural norms and tradition in the respective areas. In short, female farmers are increasingly practicing irrigation management while being excluded from important decision-making processes which influence the context for agricultural production and hence women's day-to-day work arrangements in irrigated agriculture. In addition, the high prevalence of illiteracy among rural women means that the majority of female farmers

faces additional constraints in accessing information, resources and advice on upgraded agricultural production and on-farm water management, hence limiting both their agency and economic opportunities.

Rationale of the Chosen Approach

The Water Management Reform Programme (WMP) (2012-2015) in Egypt aims at improving the capacities of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation (MALR), the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation (MWRI), and of water users for implementing integrated water resource management at national, regional, and local level. Taking into account the major constraints and challenges for women farmers, the WMP included a gender component into its activities set. Four specific gender capacity development components were designed and implemented: Basic literacy courses, solid waste management, water management and participation in farmer groups. Among these initiatives, the basic literacy component stands out for its level of innovation, sustainability and cross-institutional cooperation by developing a literacy curriculum specifically addressed to the needs of women farmers.

The development and successful application of the curriculum was the fruit of a long deliberative process, which began with the programme's aim to raise women's membership in Water User Organisations' (WUO) boards, and to facilitate their access to necessary technical information. A major constraint for this undertaking was soon realised: literacy skills were a requirement for WUO board membership – and the majority of women farmer had never been provided with the opportunity to acquire these abilities. The programme chose this major constraint as first point to tackle, and did so in its own way. The most obvious idea of simply providing women farmers with basic literacy classes, as laid out in one of the indicators for the new gender component, was quickly dropped – and justifiably so. Simple service delivery, and the usual framework of simple literacy learning, was identified as both unsustainable and inefficient, as the interlinked challenges of illiteracy and access to information and decision-making processes had to be met by a tailored approach.

A review of the existing Egyptian literacy curriculums at the national level strengthened this conviction, and highlighted the lack of a literacy curriculum specifically talking to the needs and living conditions of women farmers, and rural women in general. Hence, the participatory development of a tailored curriculum, adapted to the topic of water management in irrigation and households, and the training of a dedicated and specialised teacher pool was deemed a more sustainable measure, and one more closely related to the goal of enhancing women farmers' membership and decision-making abilities in WUO boards. The attainment of this goal not only required the minimum requirement of literacy skills, but also the empowerment of women farmers to assume leadership roles and to engage in decision-making processes, as well as the consolidation of their technical knowledge in the field of irrigated agriculture.

Cooperation and Recognition

One of the decisive features of the curriculum's success was the broadened cooperation with entities beyond the existing partner ministries. While the cooperation with MALR was already in place, WMP extended the network of partners to include a further governmental entity, the General Authority for Literacy and Adult Education (GALAE), the decisive authority on literacy education in Egypt. The partnership for an innovative literacy curriculum was officially endorsed by a Memorandum of Understanding between GALAE, MALR and WMP. GALAE's approval of the curriculum development was a major milestone for the recognition of the project and played a crucial role in securing the longevity and sustainability of the activity – it ensured that the new curriculum would be included into the national curriculum set, and be applied throughout Egypt. In addition to the three pilots, it is currently applied in five more governorates.

WMP identified “Future Eve for Egypt”, an Egyptian NGO specialised in literacy development and the combat against gender-based violence, as ideal civil society partner. The NGO supported the activity as main technical consultant in both the curriculum development, in collaboration with GALAE, and in the establishment of the six initial literacy classes in the three governorates of Quena, Beheira and Kafr El Sheikh. In addition, manifold inputs from project-internal and external GIZ colleagues and CIM experts on the draft curriculum ensured its technical quality in regards to irrigation management. It should also be mentioned that a further cooperation developed in the aftermath of the activity’s successful initiation, and recognised the programme for its innovative approach to literacy services and the positive feedback it received from students taught with the new curriculum: UNESCO has expressed its interest in adopting the curriculum in the broader MENA region, and is currently planning to introduce it to Jordan and Morocco in the course of 2016.

Approach to Activity Implementation

The curriculum was developed via a participatory approach, which included partner organisations, civil society, technical experts, implementers and clients. The design of the new curriculum took into consideration existing literacy programmes, whose contents were reviewed in regards to their suitability for female learners. It was determined that the curriculum should adopt modern methods for adult teaching while focusing on participation and interaction between teacher and learner. During field visits, community needs in implementation areas were surveyed via focus groups, including the client group of women farmers, who were vital in the process of selecting topics and vocabulary meeting their specific needs. Based on these, a draft version of the curriculum was prepared and reviewed by literacy specialists and field practitioners.

The educational objectives of the new curriculum were to provide female learners with necessary information and facts in terms of reading, writing, speaking, listening and comprehending while at the same time providing a learning process in regards to knowledge and awareness of farming operations, environmental protection, water planning and saving, and skills for engagement in decision-making processes. It can be argued that the life skills and empowerment component of the curriculum was somewhat courageous in its approach, as it tackled issues which were usually neither touched upon in conventional literacy classes, nor in any other educational setting. Inter alia, the curriculum discussed unfair and inappropriate concepts regarding women and children within their community as well as not rights-based values and traditions, such as the topic of FGM/C. FGM/C is still a widespread practice in Egypt, particularly in rural areas: the 2002-2012 prevalence of the practice among women was at a high 91.1% (UNICEF 2013). All in all, the curriculum set out to empower women to being successfully integrated into their community, to take decisions based on acquired knowledge, to communicate efficiently, and to feel comfortable in decision-making roles.

The activity also included a refresher course for teachers to acquaint them with the new technical and life skills modules of the curriculum, and to train them in a needs-based approach to teaching. To ensure further sustainability of the activity, rural community leaders at the local level, with at least a secondary education, were included and trained in the technical and literacy field to become local partners and mentors for the new literacy classes, and were qualified as literacy teachers through training of trainer courses.

Expected Impacts

Short-term impact: 18 teachers specialised in literacy delivery are given thorough explanation and instruction on the new curriculum, and consolidate their new knowledge through practicing exercises. With this background, they are well prepared to open six literacy classes based on the new curriculum in the three

pilot locations of the programme. 90 students, comprised of 75% women and 25% men, are enrolled in the literacy classes and gain basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills, in addition to being provided with technical knowledge in the agricultural field and life skills for engagement in community decision-making processes. Teachers are given technical support during the implementation of the curriculum. The new curriculum is to be accredited as one of the formal literacy programmes at the national level.

Medium-term impact: The access of women farmers to basic education, information and skills in all relevant fields of irrigated agricultures fosters their agency and provides them with the necessary competencies to actively participate in decision-making processes, with the result that women are empowered as equal partners in the context of irrigated agriculture and water management. Women farmers have the capacities to efficiently raise their concerns and express their needs and requirements adequately.

Long-term impact: Women farmers' needs are communicated and known in local communities. Women make increasingly the choice to join membership and boards of communal agriculture and water management groups.

Gender and Results-Based Monitoring

To account for the initial situation and gather baseline data, a Gender Situation Analysis was conducted, which focused on overall farming and water management systems and generated conclusions and recommendations for gender measures in WMRP's main outputs. In addition, two Gender Assessment Surveys were conducted in El Beheira and Kafr El Sheikh, two out of the three project locations. Throughout the activity implementation, the project's gender work was clearly documented. Given the activity's enhancement and actual implementation, the given indicator - *"240 women farmers receive basic literacy services in the three governorates of Quena, Beheira and Kafr El Sheikh"* - was not entirely met in quantitative terms, but more than met in its qualitative aspects, as the activity also included curriculum development and dedicated teacher trainings. Instead of simply adhering to the baseline requirement, the programme took it upon itself to develop a more sustainable approach than provided by the basic indicator.

Major Challenges and Success Factors

The major challenge identified in the course of the project was the acquisition of new partners interested as well as skilled in the development of an innovative new curriculum. First, the communication with the new partner and government entity, GALAE, did not prove easy. Given that ten literacy curricula already existed at the national level, GALAE initially adopted a skeptical stance towards the need for a new curriculum specifically aimed at women farmers. Moreover, the approval of an additional curriculum meant an arduous change in its internal regulations. It took a whole of six months to convince GALAE to give the project a chance. In the end, an intrinsic interest in the topic was the factor that convinced them to participate in the common effort, as was the challenge of devising a specifically tailored and innovative curriculum which went beyond the standard literacy modules. After having successfully won GALAE as new partner, the second challenge presented itself in finding a consultant specialised in the development – not only delivery! - of literacy curriculums, while at the same time possessing technical knowledge on the topic of women's empowerment. With the NGO "Future Eve for Egypt", the activity was ready to take off. Overall, we identified three success factors for the development and implementation of the curriculum:

1. *Follow a clear goal.* Do not give in to efforts to push the activity towards "an easy way out". Provide yourself and your partners with a vision of goal achievement and success, and how it will change the situation in the sector.
2. *Let partners buy into it.* Convince your prospective partners with perseverance and excellent, detailed arguments. Provide them with a professional challenge they will want to tackle in cooperation with you.
3. *Leadership of the project coordinator is crucial.* It helps to eliminate constraints in the management field, and facilitates cooperation with new and old partners.