



EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS

Lessons learned from the Sustainable Agriculture
Investments and Livelihoods Project in Egypt

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

This brief shares lessons learned on how Farmer Field Schools (FFS) conducted by the IFAD-supported SAIL project in Egypt successfully empowered women farmers and transformed unequal gender relations. It is intended for IFAD personnel, project teams, stakeholders and implementing partners. The brief spotlights how using this approach can lead to far-reaching changes. Taking part in FFS boosts women's confidence, voice, collaboration and skills. This strengthens their livelihoods and entrepreneurship, improves household food security and nutrition, and catalyses gender-transformative changes at household and community level. Firsthand testimonials are included.

THE PROJECT'S AIMS AND REACH

The IFAD-supported SAIL project started work in 2015 in 30 villages across Upper, Middle and Lower Egypt and is scheduled to complete in 2025. The project's overall goal is to reduce poverty and increase food and nutrition security among rural communities operating in the new lands.¹ Its development objective is to enable smallholder farmers to strengthen their incomes, increase profitability and diversify their livelihoods.

A supervision mission completed in 2024 showed that the project has reached more than 38,000 farming households, over 95 per cent of its target.² Their farms cover an agricultural area of 97,970 feddans (41,000 hectares). Since work started on the project, SAIL's targeting and social inclusion strategy has prioritized the empowerment of rural women, who were expected to represent at least 40 per cent of the participants in all activities.³ As of 2024, SAIL directly benefitted 157,420 individuals (79 per cent of the target) including 69,363 (44 per cent) females and 62,968 young people (40 per cent) – a positive performance for outreach to both women and youth, with women's participation well above the expected target.

Figure 1: Percentage of women and youth that benefitted from SAIL



¹ Sustainable Agriculture Investments and Livelihoods Design Completion Report, 2014.

<https://www.ifad.org/documents/49489126/48415603/Design+completion+report.pdf/659f99-0456b-9a-427ade-1b3e5fd8f99d6?t=1726608623484>

² SAIL Supervision Report 2024. https://www.ifad.org/documents/50528653/48415603/EGY_1100001745_SUPERVISION_REPORT_DEC_4518-1654003764-0018_2024.pdf/bf0f99d0-9cd7-4884-1c-01f36838040b61?t=1736953399958

³ SAIL's Logical Framework.



WHAT ARE FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS?



SAIL introduced FFS to support smallholder farmers and empower local communities. The field schools use a participatory, people-centred approach to learning. First set up in Asia in the late 1980s, they have since been used in agricultural development interventions in over 90 countries by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), IFAD and other development organizations.

FFS take a practical inclusive approach, creating space for hands-on group learning, enhancing observation skills, strengthening collaboration and improving decision-making by local people. Work starts with a community-based problem analysis and FFS groups then go on to develop location-specific training plans. A growing range of technical topics are addressed through FFS.⁴

HOW SAIL USES FFS

FFS are used by SAIL in Egypt's newly cultivated lands to enable smallholders to boost crop, livestock and fisheries production and to adopt sustainable, climate-resilient agricultural practices. Although many SAIL participants are agriculture graduates, much of their farming knowledge is theoretical rather than practical. They need locally relevant guidance on how to improve soil fertility, plant protection, crop diversification and other key aspects of agricultural activity. They also need training in how to increase yields while complying with changing quality standards.

Between 2017 and 2024, SAIL set up a total of 350 FFS, 30 of which were women-only. The schools have provided hands-on training to a total of 6,555 participants – 1,825 women and 4,730 men. SAIL trained and certified 40 facilitators to lead FFS implementation in the targeted areas. Ten of the facilitators were women.

The schools provided inputs and hands-on training. Women and men learned about techniques relevant to their roles and needs, including animal husbandry, poultry production, fodder cultivation and high-value crops. They learned how to increase and diversify production through techniques like inter-cropping and how to introduce new crops and varieties that were adapted to their environment, using locally available materials and alternative sources of energy. In line with the FFS approach, all new techniques were promoted through field demonstrations.

⁴ Global Farmer Field School Platform, 2018. <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/1127783/>



USING FFS TO DRIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND EMPOWER WOMEN

Women smallholder farmers in SAIL project areas suffer highly unequal access to assets, resources and services, together with very limited opportunities for off-farm employment. Women and girls also tend to have lower literacy rates than men and boys and less access to training opportunities. Early marriages and multiple pregnancies further undermine their health and opportunities, and this is exacerbated by inadequate access to skilled birth attendants and reproductive health services. Traditionally, women's participation in rural organizations and institutions is very limited, which further constrains their capacity to voice their needs and interests as farmers and community members.

Discriminatory social norms, including harmful gender relations and stereotypes, contribute to restricting women's voice, mobility, decision-making and leadership in the agricultural and rural sector, at community and household level. Time constraints, due to an excessive burden of household and care work, also affect women's overall wellbeing and opportunities. Furthermore, women in the new settlements lack social support networks, which are a critical coping mechanism for poor households.

SAIL introduced FFS as group-learning opportunities that address many of these issues and constraints at the same time in order to drive transformative and sustainable change. From a starting point of meeting the need for hands-on agricultural training, FFS were introduced by the project because of their potential to foster inclusive community development, boost women's confidence and collaboration, and strengthen their empowerment and gender equality, in line with the project's overall poverty targeting and gender strategy.

As outlined in its Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2016-2025),⁵ IFAD-supported projects aim to contribute to three specific gender objectives:

1. Promote economic empowerment to enable rural women and men to participate in and benefit from profitable economic activities.
2. Enable women and men to have equal voice and influence in rural institutions and organizations.
3. Achieve a more equitable balance in workloads and in the sharing of economic and social benefits between women and men.

⁵ IFAD's Gender equality and women's empowerment policy: <https://www.ifad.org/en/w/publications/ifad-policy-on-gender-equality-and-women-s-empowerment>



HOW DO FFS EMPOWER WOMEN AND PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY?

Interviews, observations and focus group discussions conducted in 2024 by project staff showed that the SAIL FFS had contributed effectively to driving gender-transformative change. The following aspects of field school activities were key to fostering women's economic and social empowerment.

1. THE FFS WERE DESIGNED TO BE INCLUSIVE.

They were structured to accommodate women's participation regardless of their literacy levels and to meet their specific productive needs. The FFS provided safe discussion spaces where women met regularly for the entire production season. The schools were conducted in fields or nearby areas, reducing travel barriers and accommodating women's time constraints.

2. PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES WERE USED.

These created an environment conducive to learning where all participants could exchange knowledge and experience in a risk-free setting. All FFS activities implemented by SAIL were field-based, including experimentation to solve problems, which helped the groups learn and reflect on the specific local context. Women were empowered through their traditional local knowledge being exchanged and recognized in the FFS.

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES: WHY ARE THEY NEEDED AND HOW DO THEY WORK?

Conventional gender-sensitive approaches tend to focus on the symptoms of gender discrimination – like women's unequal access to resources and their burden of domestic labour – without addressing the deeper causes. As a result, these approaches fail to create lasting change.

For gender equality to become a reality, development initiatives need to adopt approaches that go beyond the symptoms to examine and challenge the deep-rooted causes of gender inequality found in discriminatory social norms, social structures and institutions.

Gender-transformative approaches focus on shifting the power imbalances, challenging the rigid gender roles and harmful practices, and changing the discriminatory laws or policies that sustain inequality. By doing so, they aim to eliminate systemic gender discrimination and promote fair gender norms and systems. While challenging biased gender relations that often favour men, they also address norms that place unfair burdens on them. They use participatory tools and approaches to help women and men critically reflect on gender roles, norms and power dynamics. They also engage boys and men in embracing positive masculinities. These approaches are applied at different levels – individual, household, community or organizational – to drive change at individual and systemic levels, in both formal and informal areas of life.⁶

⁶ For more information and examples:

Gender-transformative approaches for food security, improved nutrition and sustainable agriculture: A compendium of fifteen good practices. FAO, IFAD, WFP, 2020.

3. FFS ARE INHERENTLY COLLABORATIVE.

This enabled women to voice their requests and work together to find solutions with the support of facilitators, who are trained to help participants establish ties with local entities and farming experts who can assist them. These collaborative activities strengthened group cohesion, communication, participation, mutual understanding and leadership, in women-only as well as in mixed groups. FFS often hold exchange visits and open-day events where their results are presented, reaching out to non-members in an informal and supportive environment.

4. FFS PROVIDED WOMEN AND MEN SMALLHOLDER FARMERS WITH LABOUR-SAVING TECHNOLOGIES, SUCH AS MECHANIZED FARMING EQUIPMENT, DRIP IRRIGATION SYSTEMS AND CROP MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE.

These significantly streamlined agricultural tasks, saving time and effort particularly for women farmers. By adopting these technologies, women carried out their farming activities more efficiently, which allowed them to allocate more time to participate in FFS sessions and other productive activities.

5. FFS' FLEXIBLE GROUP COMPOSITION CONTRIBUTED SIGNIFICANTLY TO WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT AND CHANGES IN THEIR BEHAVIOUR.

Having intergenerational, mixed-gender groups fostered valuable interaction between men and women, supporting behaviour change on both sides and the re-evaluation of power dynamics. This was a significant achievement since cultural and social barriers in most of rural Egypt restrict the mixing of women and men outside the family. FFS offered a space for participants to discuss, recognize and gain a greater understanding and appreciation of women's contributions to farming.

6. SAIL ALSO ESTABLISHED SEVERAL WOMEN-ONLY GROUPS.

These created supportive spaces for discussion, which were particularly effective when building women's confidence and self-esteem was a required preliminary step. This is very important for women who often feel more comfortable in expressing their opinions in the absence of men, especially their spouses.





7. SAIL TRAINED FFS FACILITATORS FROM THE COMMUNITY.

During the initial phases of the SAIL project, discussions were held with local communities to assess constraints, needs and market opportunities. The farmers' priority concerns and constraints were identified as the entry points to the field schools. During this process, the project identified 40 key farmers (including 10 women) with social skills and good farming experience and knowledge. Importantly, they were trusted by the community and ready to be trained and act as FFS facilitators for the following years. Facilitators from Upper, Middle and Lower Egypt were intensively trained by FAO, ensuring that all village and active agricultural cooperatives were represented. The facilitators were equipped to establish secure environments where individuals of all genders, ages and backgrounds could freely express themselves. Recognizing that literacy levels may vary among women participants, they adapted the content as needed. They also used visual aids, practical demonstrations and hands-on learning techniques to effectively convey information. Most importantly, having female facilitators fostered a supportive learning environment where women felt comfortable asking questions and sharing their knowledge. FFS women-only sessions became a safe space for women to gather, socialize, practice certain skills such as presentation and public speaking, and encourage each other not to be afraid and to try even if they make mistakes.

8. FFS FACILITATORS ALSO INNOVATED IN SAIL TARGET COMMUNITIES BY CREATING NEW COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND NETWORKING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS SUCH AS FACEBOOK AND WHATSAPP.

Women were introduced to these collaborative platforms and used them for the first time. Although most women in SAIL target communities do not own a smartphone, they access social networks on their spouses' or children's phones. This innovation facilitated communication and knowledge-sharing among FFS participants, fostering a sense of community and collective achievement that went beyond the schools. Women remained in regular communication with each other even after the FFS sessions ended, using the channels to socialize, ask for support, stay informed and more.



GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE RESULTS

According to the follow-up focus group discussions, interviews and observations by both the project and the IFAD team, SAIL's FFS interventions have fostered significant shifts in gender relations in the targeted rural areas of Egypt. Although specific gender-related topics were not included in the design of the schools (which would usually be the case for gender-transformative approaches), the group dynamics and trained facilitators produced evident gender-transformative results.

Women who took part in the schools reported better food security, significant improvements in household dynamics, increased self-confidence, greater resilience to economic and climate challenges, and greater economic autonomy, agency and leadership on and off the farm. The results reported are summarized as follows.

◆ Women increased their productivity, food security and incomes through learning to use improved farming practices and new technologies.

In line with the primary focus of the FFS, the women learned better ways to farm, acquiring new skills and adopting new techniques tailored to their needs. This boosted the productivity of their crops and livestock, cut the costs of inputs including fodder and water, and increased their incomes and food security. Through the schools, they also gained access to new equipment and technologies that enabled them to irrigate more effectively and improve soil health. And while they acquired the skills and knowledge that empowered them to manage the new approaches, this also reduced their fears about the risks associated with adopting new technologies.



◆ Attitudes changed towards unequal gender roles and responsibilities within households and communities.

The FFS approach implemented by the SAIL project fostered positive shifts in attitudes, behaviours and practices, which led to transformative changes in unequal gender relations and harmful power dynamics.

It was not easy to establish FFS for men and women together because social norms in upper Egypt restrict the mixing of the sexes. However, SAIL's approach helped to challenge this, with a focus on enabling women to participate, to voice their needs and to gain influence. In the initial stages, the FFS facilitators reached out to the women farmers and encouraged them to take part in relevant schools. Once the FFS were up and running, the facilitators ensured that the women's voices and opinions were heard, and that they were empowered to take on leadership roles.

This demonstrated to all participants that there are multiple benefits when women are included, educated and empowered. It was reported that many of the men who took part also gained an understanding of those benefits and became more accepting of women's education and participation on and off the farm. Wives felt that their husbands understood the value of them taking part and bringing back the knowledge they gained to their fields.

◆ Women gained knowledge, confidence and interpersonal skills.

While building their agricultural knowledge, the women who took part in FFS also increased their confidence, self-esteem and group participation skills. Women noted that the collaborative dynamics of the FFS had given them the opportunity to speak up in public, share their new knowledge and contribute to group discussions. This improved the learning experience for all FFS members and strengthened agriculture-related decision-making. The knowledge generation and exchange sparked by the FFS led to solidarity between women farmers, supporting community resilience and fostering cooperation and dialogue. This also improved conflict management, leading to consensus decisions. The improved group and community dynamics led to better farm performances, including increased productivity levels, with benefits in terms of livelihood, food security, diversified nutrition and household income generation.

◆ Intra-household relations improved, including shared decision-making and fairer distribution of workloads

Women reported that, as a result of their participation in the FFS, they had been able to negotiate a more equitable distribution of domestic workloads, with more openness, transparency and collaboration. Some households also reported sharing aspirations and working together as a unit. With increased confidence, women reported that they had more voice and control over resources, including over their own time. Communication between couples improved, resulting in better intra-household relations and greater harmony in the home.

◆ Women increased their participation in community development associations (CDAs), cooperatives and other types of formal organization, and gained access to communication channels.

In addition to transforming social norms and power dynamics, the FFS also had a knock-on effect on women's participation in formal organizations and groups such as CDAs operating under the SAIL project. FFS increased women's capacity to organize themselves at the community level, by both creating and strengthening existing rural organizations.

Smallholder women farmers who participated in the FFS were also empowered by being introduced to communication channels and using them to build their skills and networks. FFS facilitators introduced women to social media channels such as Facebook and WhatsApp to connect with others, ask questions, receive answers from experts on modern farming, and establish social relationships. This helped the women form networks in which they feel supported and can stay connected.



STORIES FROM THE FIELD

SAADA'S STORY: GROWING BIGGER YIELDS, GAINING INDEPENDENCE AND MAKING FRIENDS

Saada Aly is a 39-year-old smallholder farmer in West Samalout in Middle Egypt who took part in a SAIL FFS with a focus on sustainably boosting wheat production. Fifteen women and men joined the school. Saada reported big results and life changes over one season.

Where she used to produce 15-17 ardab of wheat per feddan (2,250 – 2,550 kg per 0.42 hectares), her harvest increased by about 30 per cent to 20-22 ardab (3,000-3,300 kg per 0.42 hectares).

At the same time, by introducing modern farming and irrigation methods such as drip irrigation, Saada reduced her water use from 3 ML in one season to just 2 ML. And she halved the amount of fertilizer that she uses from 300 kg to 150 kg.

“I also gained personally from the FFS,” said Saada.

“I made friends in my community who are always there for me during my ups and downs, sad events and happy moments such as my daughter’s wedding.”

In an area where women traditionally don’t leave their homes or engage with their communities, the wheat school made a huge difference to their lives, building self-reliance and empowering the women as a force for change.

The FFS created an experimental field where the participants learned through hands-on exercises, analysis, discussion and decision-making. The women farmers learned how to independently identify, analyse and assess the issues on their land and were then able to come together at the school to discuss solutions.

The FFS also supplied farmers with equipment and inputs such as drip networks, seeds, fertilizers and nutrients. Techniques such as drip irrigation reduce the misuse of valuable groundwater and together with other technologies enable farmers to adapt to climate change.

To broaden their impact and share their success beyond the group, the wheat FFS set up a Facebook page to showcase their results. They also created an extended WhatsApp group of 150 wheat farmers to support regular communication and exchange of information and knowledge.



SHEREEN'S JOURNEY: FINDING HER VOICE, NETWORKING AND GROWING STRONGER CROPS

Shereen Adel is a 22-year-old smallholder farmer in Wadi El-Noqra, Aswan, Upper Egypt. She joined a SAIL FFS to improve her fenugreek harvest and attended a mixed school for the first time in her life. The experience of taking part in the hands-on field sessions and discussions gave Shereen much more than better harvests – she also found her voice, built her network and learned to contribute to joint decisions in the community.

“Before we attended the FFS, there was no mixing of men and women in our village,” said Shereen.

“We didn’t have a voice in front of them. The FFS made us speak and voice our opinion in front of men. ... and now we get to make decisions.”

From having no contact with the men in their community, and not knowing who their neighbours were, the women in Wadi El-Noqra are now in regular communication with other members of the FFS, both women and men. They seek and share advice and solutions, and brainstorm business ideas together.

Setting a new precedent, the men ended up learning from the women, listening to their opinions and trusting their decision-making on what and how to farm. The field school has also given the women the chance to socialize, boosting their confidence and happiness.

Thanks to the agricultural knowledge and skills that Shereen acquired through the FFS, she now grows her fenugreek on specially constructed terraces in broad rows about 40 cm above ground level. Irrigation water is channelled in lines between the rows to prevent flooding. This type of terraced cultivation is a modern method that has been disseminated in many of IFAD’s FFS, leading to an increase in production and cost savings for farmers.

SMALL STEPS LEAD TO BIG CHANGES: BETTER FEED FOR DUCKS SOWS THE SEEDS OF EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN IN MOTOBUS

A group of ten local women took the initiative and joined a SAIL FFS in El Said El-Badawy village, Motobus, Lower Egypt to learn how to successfully raise ducks as a source of nutrition and income. As part of the women-only group, each participant received five ducks from SAIL and attended the field school for three months.

The hands-on learning sessions were led by community facilitator Mariam Sobhy Abdelsalam. Keen to extend her knowledge, Mariam attended a conference where she learned about the Azolla plant and its use as a natural livestock feed. A unique freshwater fern, Azolla is one of the fastest growing plants on the planet.

After the conference, Mariam discussed what she had learned with the FFS, where elder members confirmed that Azolla had been used as a traditional fodder in the past and was affordable and nutritious. With all the participants on board, the FFS then went on to learn how to cultivate Azolla at home to feed their flocks and to sell to other farmers.

The women reported that ducks fed with the home-grown Azolla showed an increase in weight of as much as 4-5 kg and were generally healthier. And there was a substantial saving in cost. Previously, the women bought 12 kg of fodder for about EGP 360 (US\$7.10) over four to six months, the average period it takes for a duck to reach the required weight.

Growing their own Azolla reduced the cost to just EGP 120 (US\$2.37) for 12 kg of fodder over the same period. Women are now selling the birds for EGP 600-700 (US\$11.85-13.82) per head.

When other women in the community saw the improvement in the weight and quality of the ducks, they asked the FFS participants to teach them how to grow Azolla. With very little resources and minimal space, four women who did not participate in the school are now cultivating Azolla and selling it locally for about EGP 50 (US\$0.99) per day. This is their main income-generating activity.

Motivated by their success in the duck FFS, the women took another important step towards empowerment and joined the Green Country Women's Association - a community development association (CDA) established in 2018. This is one of the most successful and sustainable CDAs under the SAIL project, with 50 women members.

It has a fully functioning tailoring workshop, a clinic and a nursery. Women pool a part of their income to pay for the clinic and the nursery, which cares for 30-50 children, freeing up their mothers' time. The women work together, continue learning, exchange knowledge and best practices, and take joint decisions about new directions.

"Many women in our village didn't want to take on raising ducks as an activity due to its high cost and lack of availability of fodder," Mariam said.

"After using Azolla, we saw how easily it grows and does not cost much. We all saw its benefits to our ducks. We all now want more ducks and now our whole village is planting Azolla."

KHAIREYA'S STORY: OUT INTO THE FIELDS TO SHIFT SOCIAL NORMS AND DRIVE CHANGE

In El-Gehad village, West El Fashn, Middle Egypt, women were expected to take part in field schools only if the training was focused on livestock, which are traditionally their responsibility. When 46-year-old Khaireya Mustafa and other women joined a FFS on wheat cultivation they came up against a lot of pushback and were criticized for working with men in the fields.

“Every time we would start talking about FFS at the beginning, people in our community would say ‘How could you go out and learn at your old age?’” said Khaireya.

“But we kept persisting to attend.”

The women applied the lessons they learned in the school to their own fields and increased their wheat harvests by 23.5 per cent per feddan, while cutting costly water consumption by 25 per cent.

With their new-found confidence, the women organized a ceremony at the end of the FFS to celebrate their achievements. The celebration attracted farmers from nearby villages to come and learn about the new techniques and buy their produce. Other women were also encouraged to sign up for field school training.

Some of the members of the EL Gehad wheat school also became members of the Middle Egyptian Women's Association. This is one of the most successful and sustainable community development associations within the SAIL project, enabling its members to start their own small businesses off the farm, including sewing and soap-making.

“Now as women we have an opinion and we are heard!” said Khaireya.

“The men now listen to us and recognize that our opinion and our decisions are valid. Now that we have learned the know-how, we contribute as much as men.”



TRANSFORMING WASTE INTO RESILIENCE: HOW WOMEN'S INNOVATIONS BOOST THEIR INCOMES AND PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT

Women shepherds taking part in a SAIL field school in El-Gehad village set out to solve a shared problem: fodder was costing them as much as EGP 100 a day (US\$1.98) and it wasn't fattening their sheep or improving the animals' health.

Observing that plant waste like leaves, corn cobs and sticks are thrown away or burnt, the women brainstormed to find ways to prevent pollution and turn the crop waste into usable fodder. They experimented with different parts of the leftover plants and found a way to use grinder machines to create a natural silage for their sheep.

"This silage came up from discussions, sharing opinions among ourselves in the FFS," said 46-year-old Safeya Abdelhamid.

"Many people in my village turned this into a business, since we all now adopted silage."

At the start of the field school, the FFS group received 10 sheep that weighed 18 kg each on average. With the introduction of the innovative silage, the sheep now weigh 36 to 45 kg.

The health of the animals has also improved. "Our school won because our sheep were healthy, strong, in great condition more than any other school, all thanks to silage as a natural, healthy, affordable alternative, the silage that we innovated," said Safeya.

Now women from the El-Gehad school teach other women in nearby villages how to make silage and raise their awareness of its environmental and health benefits. They encourage them to make it at home and to sell it.

In addition to using silage as a healthy, natural fodder alternative, the women are also using garlic and onions as natural antibiotics, reducing the need for expensive medication. These natural remedies boost the immunity and productivity of their sheep and protect the environment from harmful chemical pollutants, helping to maintain ecological balance and protect biodiversity. Women are leading the way for other rural women, as they play a key role in strengthening the resilience of rural livelihoods.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis conducted by the project team and the testimonials confirm that SAIL's FFS successfully addressed and reduced barriers and challenges faced by women smallholder farmers in Egypt, empowering them and sparking gender-transformative results.

The benefits to the women were multidimensional and life-changing. The experience of taking part in the FFS helped them to boost their natural, financial, human and social capital.



Overall, the women's participation in different FFS across the SAIL project areas created positive shifts in social norms, attitudes, behaviours and practices. This further increased the number of women joining FFS, strengthening their confidence and self-esteem, and improving their decision-making capacities. This also led to changes in social and interpersonal dynamics, especially at household level, and increased the degree of collaboration on and off field, with a more equitable workload and division of tasks. Women's access to information and services also improved.

HOW TO REPLICATE THIS EXPERIENCE AND PROMOTE GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE FFS MORE SYSTEMATICALLY

The following recommendations are drawn from the lessons learned from SAIL's experiences with FFS. They are intended to support IFAD staff, project management units and implementing partners, to design and implement FFS with stronger gender-transformative potential in other IFAD-supported projects in Egypt and the Near East and North Africa region.

◆ INTENTIONALLY IDENTIFY GENDER EQUALITY AS AN INTEGRAL OBJECTIVE OF FFS AND MAINSTREAM GENDER CONCERNS FROM THEIR DESIGN TO IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING.

While interesting gender-related results have been observed during the implementation of FFS across various IFAD-supported projects, more focused and concerted efforts are needed to make this approach intentionally empowering and transformative in terms of unequal gender dynamics. IFAD staff assigned to support social inclusion in projects should be involved as early as possible to provide guidance on this integration.

◆ BUILD STAFF CAPACITY ON GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION.

It is crucial for all personnel involved in FFS implementation, including facilitators and master trainers, to be fully aware, motivated and knowledgeable about a project's gender and targeting strategies and objectives. IFAD should always ensure that project staff are equipped with the skills to effectively understand and address different gender needs and dynamics. Sensitizing FFS facilitators and members on the importance of encouraging female participation and leadership within the field schools is also extremely important, even if this means challenging existing social norms.

◆ DESIGN FFS BASED ON MEN AND WOMEN'S SPECIFIC ROLES, NEEDS AND CONSTRAINTS.

To facilitate women's participation, especially in contexts characterized by a rigid gender division of labour, it is very important to design and deliver trainings that align with and respond to women's specific roles and constraints (for example, mobility or time constraints). FFS are sufficiently flexible and context-specific to allow for this adaptation of their focus, curriculum and operational modalities. As the SAIL's experience shows, FFS are much more likely to achieve empowering and transformative results when the involvement of female facilitators is prioritized and when curricula and activities are intentionally designed to include both women and men. Conducting a rapid gender appraisal to understand the socio-cultural context, including the economic needs and the social norms of the community where the FFS will take place, can be very helpful to adapt the standard FFS curriculum in a meaningful way.

◆ STRENGTHEN WOMEN'S ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND SERVICES.

FFS have the potential to intentionally address women's limited access to resources and services. They can do this by connecting women with financial institutions and integrating them into groups and associations that create opportunities for their economic empowerment – for example, village saving and loans associations (VSLAs). FFS can also offer training programmes for women and men, such as financial literacy, alongside sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture farming practices.

◆ ENGAGE AND SENSITIZE MEN AND BOYS.

To combat harmful social norms and gender relations that restrict women's participation in FFS, it is fundamental to engage men in targeted sessions and include conversations on harmful masculinity. Initiatives such as male engagement dialogues and role model peer-to-peer learning, can play a pivotal role in challenging traditional gender norms and promoting male involvement in gender equality efforts. Training and sensitizing men about gender roles and highlighting the advantages of women's participation in FFS are also essential steps in fostering a cultural shift towards a more equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities. This ensures that both genders are equipped with the knowledge and awareness needed to promote gender equality and foster inclusive agricultural development within the FFS context.

◆ COLLECTING DATA THAT GOES BEYOND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IS ALSO EXTREMELY IMPORTANT.

Simple baseline and endline qualitative surveys, combined with focus group discussions and interviews, can provide a wealth of information on gender-transformative results, which would otherwise be completely overlooked.

◆ DEVELOP KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS THAT HIGHLIGHT THE LINKAGES BETWEEN FFS AND GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT.

This case study is a first step in responding to this need. It is important that IFAD develops guidelines and additional knowledge products that provide practitioners with practical tools and examples for better integrating gender considerations at design and during the implementation of FFS.





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