



ILO Initiatives on Promoting Women's Participation in Cooperatives in oPt (2009-2012)

Women's Employment in the oPt

Poor security and structural economic deficits have contributed to women's exclusion from paid and protected employment in the occupied Palestinian territory. High levels of unemployment among women (30.5 per cent) and low levels of female labour force participation (16.7 per cent) are linked to social and cultural constraints and the time women spend on reproductive and care work. The majority of working-age women are active in unpaid care work, which is critical to the well being of households. The importance of unpaid care work is amplified in the oPt as a key area for social policy because of limited social care services unavailability of efficient and effective transportation systems as well as movement restrictions (checkpoints, the Wall, and curfews).

Source: PCBS, Third Quarter LFS, 2011.

The joint programme under the UNDP-Spain MDG Achievement fund (MDG-F) on "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the occupied Palestinian territory" (oPt) brought together six UN agencies (the UNDP, UNIFEM, UNFPA, UNESCO, UNRWA and ILO) to work with relevant ministries of the PA, effective partners from civil society and the private sector on the promotion of Palestinian women's social, economic and political empowerment through:

- Reducing gender-based violence and all forms of violence against women;
- Increasing the representation of women and women's issues in decision-making bodies;
- Advancing equal opportunities for women's economic participation, especially women survivors of gender-based violence.

The ILO took the lead for achieving the third programme outcome on "advancing equal opportunities for women's economic participation, especially women survivors of gender-based violence". One of the outputs under this outcome focused on supporting rural women producers and their cooperatives by targeting national cooperative stakeholders.

Assessment on Mainstreaming Gender Equality Concerns in Palestinian Cooperatives

A situation and institutional assessment on "Mainstreaming Gender Equality concerns in Palestinian cooperatives" was conducted in 2009 to identify: existing gender dynamics and situation of women in Palestinian cooperatives; obstacles to the integration of women and men into Palestinian cooperatives; tools and strategies needed for cooperative leaders and service providers to better mainstream gender concerns; ways to improve the participation and position of women in cooperatives and to improve the skills and know-how in women-only cooperatives and among women leaders of cooperatives; and training needs of women and men in cooperatives.

Despite the relatively long history of the Palestinian cooperative movement, women's participation in cooperatives remains low. In 2009, only 101 out of the 461 cooperatives in the West Bank had women members. Majority of these are agricultural cooperatives with only 14 per cent women as members. In addition to the widely held notion that women prefer to participate in women-only cooperatives, a more pressing reason is their limited access to and control over land and financial resources needed for obtaining membership. Most women cooperatives in oPt have been established after 2000 mainly as a result of donor requirements especially in dispersing microfinance funds. Therefore the participation of Palestinian women in cooperatives is particularly high in saving and credit associations representing 60 per cent of women membership.

The impediments to the development of women cooperatives and to women's participation in cooperatives in the Occupied Palestinian Territories include:

- Low educational attainment, minimal income levels, limited access to and control over savings and assets among women;
- Patriarchal norms and rigid gender stereotypes regarding roles;
- Insufficient participation of women and poor potential for women membership expansion in cooperatives;
- Unequal share of care responsibilities which takes away from their abilities to fully engage in cooperative activities;
- Leadership willingness to involve women either to maximize their ownership shares and financial returns from the cooperative or to attract donors' support to their cooperatives.
- Even when in leadership positions women being relegated to clerical roles considered "suitable" and compatible with their care taking roles;
- The emphasis of existing women cooperatives on social development and welfare rather than economic activities;
- Limited awareness of cooperative principles among women cooperative leaders and members;
- Lack of cooperative management, leadership and marketing skills among women-only cooperatives; and
- A lack of administrative and financial policies in the operation of women-only cooperatives.

The assessment came out with a set of key findings and recommendations to contribute in enhancing the economic performance of the Palestinian women's cooperatives and to increase their participation. The recommendations ranged from the need to lay foundations for success of women-only cooperatives; and building the capacity of Cooperative Counsellors at the Ministry of Labour in order to provide more effective guidance; to supporting women cooperatives; and developing context appropriate training materials and tools for women cooperators.

Policy Round Table



The findings and recommendations from the assessment were presented during a policy roundtable with tripartite constituents, development support organizations, union of cooperatives, and Cooperative Department of the Ministry of Labour for validation and prioritization. The discussions concentrated around the two main policy recommendations that were put forward: Laying the foundations for the success of new women-only cooperatives; and Strengthening existing women-only cooperatives through meso and micro level interventions.

Cooperatives Training of Trainers (ToT) Workshops

In March 2010, a ToT workshop was organized to: increase the volume of business and improve the quality of products and services of women cooperatives; and develop linkages with mixed co-operatives and cooperative unions and replicate good practices of women cooperatives. The 27 participants in the workshop, leaders of women-only cooperatives in the West Bank, women promoters from cooperative unions, Ministry of Labour, and development specialists from development NGOs and local business development service providers, were trained to work as cooperative extension workers and to promote women cooperatives in the West Bank and Gaza Strip through the provision of cooperative management and leadership training, as well as consultancy and business development services.



The tools used during the ToT workshop included ILO cooperative management training materials on basic cooperative knowledge, cooperative law and policies, ILO Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation (193), Cooperative Management and Leadership, Value Chain Analysis in Cooperatives, Basic Economics of an Agricultural Cooperative, and Gender Mainstreaming in Cooperatives). Some of ILO's women entrepreneurship development tools were also used in developing the materials including Gender and Entrepreneurship Together – GET Ahead, Business Group Formation Guide and Basic Training Methodology. As part of the training workshop, trainers from cooperatives associations have designed action plans for economic empowerment in women's cooperatives.

Training Material Development for Cooperative Extension Workers



To enhance the capacity of women's cooperatives, ILO supported the development of the *Cooperative Extension Workers' Manual* for cooperative extension workers using participatory training methodologies. Based on ILO MATCOM training materials and local cooperative legislation and policies, the manual covered key operational aspects of working with women cooperatives in the field and to supporting the implementation of capacity building programmes for women cooperatives. A six day ToT workshop was conducted for 21 cooperative extension workers in the West Bank from 11 organizations (MoL, UN Women and NGOs) and active women cooperatives.

Union of Cooperative Associations for Savings and Credit (UCASC)

Of all the institutions that participated in the TOT workshop, the action plan developed by the Union of Cooperative Associations for Saving and Credit (UCASC) was the one that exhibited the greatest potential for purposes of increasing the participation and improving the conditions of women in cooperatives. As proposed in its action plan UCASC conducted a training needs assessment followed by a series of capacity building activities in the West Bank to improve the skills of cooperative administrative committee members in 40 Palestinian women's cooperatives in awareness raising, business skills development, coaching, cooperative management and governance.

Union of Cooperative Associations for Saving and Credit (UCASC) was registered with the Ministry of Labour as a voluntary, democratic umbrella organization of Palestinian saving and credit associations in 2005. UCASC is the only union of cooperatives where women members consists the majority of all members in the cooperative sector. The *vision* of the union is to build a better future for Palestinian women living in rural areas based on cooperative principles. Its *mission* is to protect its member associations through improving the legal environment, and building capacities of its members through non-financial and financial services.

List of UCASC Activities

- Diagnostic assessment of women cooperatives' institutional capacities,
- Identification of the problems, gaps and response strategies (in cooperation with cooperative management members),
- Conducting four public awareness workshops with 97 members from 40 women cooperatives in the West Bank (May-June 2011),
- Developed and conducted an assessment questionnaire for 39 women cooperatives, and
- Conducted 28 counselling sessions and field visits for (173) cooperatives administrative committee members,

- Conducted 13 training courses for 214 administrative committee members on cooperative principles, cooperative work and good governance, cooperative management, communications skills, and feasibility study including book keeping,
- Conducted five specialized vocational training (computer skills training, tailoring and dress design, ceramic design, and handcraft) for 60 women members.
- Organized 20 coaching visits following the above interventions to review cooperative actions plan toward qualifying to receive seed grants, and
- Disbursement of see grants to 13 women cooperatives to purchase equipment, raw materials, produce cooperative promotional materials and get specialized training courses.

Next steps



UCASC will monitor the 13 seed grants through consultancy, coaching and monitoring visits. Capacities of cooperative extension workers at the Cooperative Unit of MoL will be improved through a three to four day workshop on the principles of cooperative-enterprise development, cooperative assessment/evaluation, financial management, business feasibility surveys and promoting gender equality in cooperatives. Cooperative promotional and awareness raising materials (brochures and flyers) will be developed. Several small booklets will be extracted from the cooperative extension guide on marketing, coop registration/management, and coop law.

For more information please contact Rawand Al Madmouj, National Officer, Gender and Livelihoods Activities, Ramallah/Jerusalem, Email: al-madmouj@ilo.org

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