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# EMPOWERING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN THE MENA AGRO-FOOD SECTOR

## THROUGH SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

OUTCOME  
DOCUMENT



With the technical collaboration of



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations

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# Background and Context

Across the MENA region, women are central to the agro-food system—as producers, processors, retailers, innovators, and custodians of traditional knowledge. Yet their participation remains constrained by deep-rooted inequalities: limited access to land and finance, low representation in cooperatives and decision-making spaces, and exclusion from research and innovation ecosystems. As the region faces the intersecting pressures of climate change, food insecurity, and unemployment, enabling women's innovation within this field has become an urgent and strategic priority.

To address these challenges, the **Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)** in collaboration with the **American University in Cairo (AUC) Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (CEI)**, the **International**

**Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM)**, the **FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa (FAORNE)**, the **Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA)**, and with the financial support of the **Spanish Cooperation Agency (AECID)** convened a two-day **Capacity Building Training and Regional Stakeholder Dialogue on Empowering women entrepreneurs in the MENA agro-food sector through social and technological innovation** in **Cairo on 21–22 October 2025**. The event gathered around **80 participants**, including **50 women entrepreneurs and cooperative leaders** from seven UfM–Masar countries (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia), alongside innovation hubs, researchers, donors, investment funds, and international organisations. Together, they explored how social and technological innovation can serve as powerful levers for women's economic empowerment and regional food system transformation.

The Cairo dialogue forms part of the UfM's broader work under the **Regional Innovation Agenda for Women Entrepreneurs in Agro-Food Value Chains**, supported by AECID, and represented a milestone toward the developing of the agenda.



# Summary of Discussions: Capacity Building and Regional Stakeholder Dialogue

The first part of the event consisted of an intensive, practice-oriented **Capacity Building programme** designed to strengthen participants' entrepreneurial, digital, and leadership skills. Before the training started, some participants presented their own businesses as case studies from the region within the agro-food supply chain: Roua Adel, CEO of Aquayate, Algeria, Nouha Benzbir, Founder Velours Lactés, Tunisia, and Salam Al-Nukta, Founder of Warsha, Egypt.

The training sessions began with a dynamic exploration of **digital tools and agri-tech solutions**, led by **Dr. Noura Abdelwahab**, which showcased how affordable technologies—ranging from e-commerce platforms and digital farm mapping systems to solar-powered cold chains—can transform agricultural practices and open new market opportunities. Participants engaged directly with

interactive demos and low-cost technology mapping exercises, gaining insights into how digital tools can enhance productivity while addressing sustainability challenges. Importantly, the discussion emphasised that

technology adoption must be gender-inclusive, ensuring that women's diverse needs, access levels, and constraints are fully considered in innovation design and deployment.

This theme of inclusivity was carried forward into **Workshop 2**, facilitated by **Irene Boghdady** of Chemonics Egypt, which focused on **entrepreneurship and business modelling** in the agro-food sector. Participants explored how to translate innovative ideas into viable business ventures through the **Business Model Canvas** with a strong focus on **value proposition**, reflecting on the importance of value creation, market fit, and environmental sustainability. Drawing on regional examples and her experience with start-ups such as **Mozare3**, Boghdady underscored that innovation is not only about introducing new products but about solving systemic inefficiencies in the agro-food chain—such as access to inputs, market linkages, and fair pricing. The discussion also addressed pressing regional challenges like water scarcity, land degradation, and energy costs, and how women entrepreneurs can contribute to “greening” agriculture through adaptive and circular models.

Afterwards, a rotating peer-to-peer coaching session was held, during which participants exchanged challenges and ideas related to scaling, distribution and market access, access to funding, and strategic partnerships, while highlighting the essential role of collaboration. The discussion was facilitated by **Rawiah Ismail Abdallah**, Management Consultant and Coach, with moderation by the Women Entrepreneurs Network (WEN).

The second day opened with a workshop on **Access to Finance and Investment Readiness**, delivered by **Christine Sedky**, Investor&Advisor, who guided participants through the journey of securing investment—from initial outreach and pitch preparation to due diligence and closing deals. Participants learned how to articulate their funding needs, present traction metrics, and identify the right kind of investors for their stage of growth. Sedky highlighted the importance of clarity in the problem-solution fit, scalability, and social impact, reminding participants that impact and innovation are essential elements in order to secure fundings.

The final session, led by **Ayah El-Arief**, Managing Director of the MENA Women Business Club (MWBC), Egypt, focused on **leadership and collective action**. Participants discussed how women entrepreneurs can play a more active role in shaping policy and influencing institutional change by mapping their networks of allies and potential partners. The workshop concluded

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ed with a call for stronger coalitions of women leaders in agro-food systems, connecting cooperatives, incubators, and advocacy groups across borders.

**The second part of the event** brought together policymakers, donors, financial institutions, and regional organisations for a **Regional Stakeholder Dialogue**, toward building consensus around a **Regional Agenda on Innovation for Women Entrepreneurs in Agro-Food Value Chains**.

Anna Dorangricchia (UfM) and Raúl Compés López (CIHEAM Zaragoza) explained that, building on the outcomes of the **Zaragoza Symposium (June 2025)**, the CIHEAM and the UfM recognised that empowering women as innovators and entrepreneurs is essential for

## Four thematic pillars for the upcoming Agenda: inclusive innovation ecosystems, access to finance and infrastructure, enabling policies and institutions, and leadership and collective action.

achieving inclusive growth, sustainable food systems, and regional stability. Opening remarks from the **Spanish Cooperation Agency**, FAORNE, AECID, PRIMA, and AUC CEI underscored the central role of women entrepreneurs as catalysts for inclusive and climate-resilient food systems.

Speakers highlighted persistent barriers such as limited access to finance and technology, but also pointed to the growing momentum among governments and regional organisations to coordinate responses and scale successful models.

Discussions unfolded around four thematic pillars for the upcoming Agenda: **inclusive innovation ecosystems, access to finance and infrastructure, enabling policies and institutions, and leadership and collective action**.

Participants reflected on the policy gaps and systemic obstacles that constrain women's participation in agro-food innovation. Participants emphasized the need for stronger regional **research networks and innovation clusters** that could provide women entrepreneurs with sustained technical support and market intelligence. From the private sector perspective, there was a strong call for **gender-responsive investment instruments** to face financial barriers. **Professor Monera Galal, Gender Expert Lead of the Delegation of the European Union to Egypt**, drawing on findings from the **EU KAFI Programme**, noted that **structural inequalities—ranging from inadequate gender data to limited institutional coordination—continue to slow progress**.

Government and institutional representatives also shared perspectives on how to close these gaps. **Heba Zaki** from Egypt's Entrepreneurship and Innovation Center stressed that **institutional reform is essential** for scaling women-led enterprises, while **Gloria Abouzeid** from Lebanon's Ministry of Agriculture called for **greater integration of women into cooperatives and local governance structures to ensure representation and leadership at every level of the value chain**.

The second roundtable focused on solutions and good practices—chief among them the **need for coordinated regional action, harmonized policy, legal, and financial frameworks**, and multi-stakeholder **investment partnerships**.

# Presentation of the Joint UfM–CIHEAM Declaration

A major highlight of the dialogue was the presentation of the [Joint UfM–CIHEAM Draft Declaration: Commitment to a Regional Agenda on Innovation for Women Entrepreneurs in the Agro-Food Value Chain in the Euro-Mediterranean Region](#). The Declaration articulates a shared commitment among partners to strengthen women's access to innovation ecosystems, promote gender-sensitive policies, integrate women's leadership into the design of agro-food systems, and build institutional coordination. It calls for concrete measures to enhance women's participation in research, technology transfer, and value-chain governance, and for the establishment of a collaborative roadmap to advance these objectives in 2026, designated by the United Nations as the [International Year of Women Farmers](#).



# Emerging Results and Participants' Feedback

Following the regional event, a follow-up survey was shared with participants, resulting in responses from across the MENA region. The majority were women entrepreneurs (81.25%), alongside representatives from cooperatives (12.5%) and NGOs (6.25%). Respondents came from Jordan (25%), Lebanon and Tunisia (18.75% each), Algeria and Egypt (12.5% each), and Morocco and Syria (6.25% each).

As **Main Takeaways**, participants agreed that the event strengthened **their understanding of the critical role women can play as innovators in the agro-food sector**. Many noted a shift toward seeing women not only as beneficiaries, but as key drivers of technological progress, sustainability, and market transformation when provided with adequate support.

## Overall experience

**62,50%  
Excellent**

**37,50%  
Good**

Excellent / Response: 10 / 62,50%

Good / Response: 6 / 37,50%

Fair / Response: 0 / 0,00%

Poor / Response: 0 / 0,00%

Leadership development, confidence building, and greater visibility emerged as essential components of empowerment.

**Networking and regional collaboration** were highlighted as major benefits, with participants emphasizing the value of exchanging experiences and solutions with peers across the region.

The **practical aspects of the training** were also **appreciated**, especially sessions on business models, value propositions, food safety, digital tools, marketing, and market positioning.

**Overall satisfaction was very high, with 62.5% rating the event as excellent and 37.5% as good.**

## Priorities for the Regional Agenda

Survey responses pointed to several areas that should guide the development of a Regional Innovation Agenda for Women in the Agro-Food Value Chain, including:

- **Access to finance**, through women-focused funding mechanisms such as grants, guarantees, and accelerators.
- **Continued capacity building development in entrepreneurship**, digitalization, technology adoption, and certification and export standards.
- **Strengthening market access and enabling system**, with regional hubs, mentorship, incubators, and digital platforms to improve visibility and connect value-chain actors.
- **Gender-responsive policies**, particularly related to land access, infrastructure, and decision-making.
- **Sustained regional networking**, enabling continued collaboration beyond the event.

## Recommendations for Future Activities

Overall satisfaction with the training was very high, but participants suggested improvements for future activities, such as placing even more emphasis on **practical, hands-on learning** and **tailoring sessions to different stages of business maturity level**. Some suggested **longer or modular training formats**. A strong call was made for **continuity—ongoing coaching**, peer support, and regular engagement opportunities to maintain momentum and support implementation of lessons learned. Overall, the Cairo Training and Dialogue Event demonstrated the power of partnership, knowledge exchange, and collective leadership in reimagining the future of agro-food systems through women's innovation.

# Next Steps (Q4 2025 – Q2 2026)

- **December 2025:** Launch of a **Technical Assistance (TA)** (supported by AECID) on regional mapping of actors, initiatives, and donors to inform policy design and the draft of the Regional Agenda – taking into consideration the feedback received from the event's participants;
- **Early 2026:** Establishment of a **Regional Task Force** on Innovation for Women in Agro-

Food Value Chains; based on follow-up coordination meetings with AECID, FAORNE, CIHEAM and regional partners to define joint activities under the Regional Task Force and the 2026 International Year of Women Farmers.

- **Q2 2026:** Presentation of the **UfM Regional Agenda and Implementation Roadmap**; The Regional Agenda will align with ongoing UfM initiatives on the **Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus**, with training and dialogue series continuing through 2026. It will also draw from the **background paper and policy report** of the **High-Level Regional Dialogue on Women's Empowerment and Access to Finance for Advancing Circular Agriculture in the Arab Region** event organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in collaboration with the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD) and the Women Development Organization (WDO), in Amman, Jordan, on 5-6 November 2025.





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