

CASE STUDY

COLLECTIVE POWER

WOMEN TRANSFORMING
LIVELIHOODS THROUGH

Akoub

Economic Justice
Programme

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OXFAM

Collective Power: Women Transforming Livelihoods through Akoub

Agriculture plays a central role in the livelihoods, culture, and resilience of West Bank communities. In 2023, it employed 6.2% of the workforce (Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute-MAS, 2023) and supported thousands of smallholder families cultivating olives, vegetables, and grains that are vital to local food security and cultural heritage.

Yet this sector is marked by deep gender inequality. Women represent only 17% of the formal agricultural labor force (PCBS 2023), and many of those engaged in agriculture are concentrated in unpaid family labor. Structural barriers—including limited land ownership (5–10%), restricted access to finance, and weak market integration—continue to limit women’s participation in decision-making and income generation.

These challenges have intensified following the spillover effects of the war on Gaza. Between October 2023 and April 2025, OCHA recorded 3,500 access incidents impacting Palestinians, many affecting farmers’ access to land. Unemployment has risen sharply, especially among men who lost work permits, increasing household economic pressure. Women, particularly in the 12% of female-headed households (PCBS, 2025), face growing insecurity, higher reliance on aid, and restricted mobility, with up to 25% of households reporting that women and girls avoid certain areas due to safety concerns near settlements and checkpoints.

In this fragile context, women’s groups have emerged as more than livelihood mechanisms. They are spaces for solidarity, knowledge exchange, psychosocial support, and collective problem-solving. Importantly, they are also platforms through which women are gradually expanding their economic agency within highly constrained environments.

It is within this broader landscape that Oxfam in OPT, in partnership with the Rural Women’s Development Society (RWDS), supported women in Qalqilya to form a women’s group and identify viable livelihood opportunities. Through a participatory process, women identified Akoub—a climate-resilient, culturally significant native plant—as a viable entry point for income generation. The process ensured women defined the crop, production model, and implementation approach, reflecting a commitment to localization and women-led economic justice.

This case study explores how collective action can enable women to build economic, social, and environmental resilience while advancing gender equity.



Why Akoub, Why Now?

Akoub is a seasonal wild plant deeply rooted in Palestinian cuisine and cultural heritage, traditionally harvested by women in rural areas for food and medicinal use. However, overharvesting[1], unsustainable practices, and restricted land access have made it increasingly scarce in the wild, with current market supply meeting only 30% of the demand.

At the same time, women farmers in Qalqilya and surrounding villages face growing security risks due to the Israeli occupation, which has made accessing agricultural lands. For many, movement is not only difficult but unsafe. Cultivating Akoub close to home therefore offers more than convenience—it provides a safer way to sustain livelihoods while maintaining control over their work.

Beyond improving safety, Akoub offers multiple economic and social benefits. As a high-value crop, it increases women's income, financial independence, and control over production decisions, while strengthening their role within households and communities. Organized cultivation also reduces pressure on wild populations by introducing a more sustainable production system, ensuring the crop's long-term availability.

Through the DGD project, the women came together to grow, process, and market Akoub in various forms- uncleaned, cleaned[2], and frozen -broadening income streams and strengthening their ability to sustain livelihoods despite movement restrictions and market instability. What began as a small initiative has evolved into a promising model that reduces pressure on wild populations and promotes sustainable agriculture.

It helps ensure the long-term availability of this crop, while also strengthening women's economic empowerment and their role in decision-making.



[1] Overharvesting refers to the unsustainable collection of wild Akoub (*Gundelia tournefortii*), traditionally foraged for consumption and sale. Heavy collection before regeneration, combined with habitat loss and restricted land access, has reduced wild populations, making near-home cultivation a safer and more sustainable alternative. Restricted land access has reduced wild populations, making near-home cultivation a safer and more sustainable alternative.

[2] 'Clean' and 'not clean' refer to whether the thorns have been removed from the edible part of the plant to make it ready for cooking.

Project Overview: The Akoub Women's Group

The idea to cultivate Akoub originated with Rana (a farmer and informal coordinator for the group) who was inspired by her father's traditional planting and harvesting of the plant. After participating in demonstration sites organized by the project, 17 women from five rural communities in Qalqilya, including Rana, embraced the idea and came together to cultivate Akoub near their homes. Despite diverse backgrounds and limited prior collaboration, they quickly built trust and shared a goal: generating reliable income while preserving a culturally important plant. With the project's support, they received training in sustainable cultivation along with seedlings and water irrigation networks and learned post-harvest processing and marketing skills.

To improve safety and productivity, the women cultivated 15 dunums of land near their homes. Each manages her own plot and uses drip irrigation, extending the harvest period from three to five months, ensuring a steady supply of Akoub.



Once harvested, around 30 women from the communities participate in cleaning, packaging, and freezing Akoub. Some are hired to assist group members, while others buy Akoub to process and sell it independently. This arrangement is mutually beneficial: the women who cultivate receive much-needed support, while those handling processing can work from the comfort and flexibility of their own homes, balancing income-generating activities with household responsibilities. This setup showcases how women empowered by their skills and confidence, can create and manage jobs for others, demonstrating leadership and extending their impact beyond their own plots.

Marketing is coordinated largely by Rana, who uses her networks and social media to reach buyers in across the West Bank. Each woman also sells directly within her community, with Rana assisting when needed. All harvested Akoub is sold, though demand remains higher than supply.

Group members primarily support one another through knowledge sharing, exchanging cultivation, processing, and sales tips via WhatsApp. This peer-to-peer approach promotes collaboration, builds confidence, and strengthens social connections, even if they do not directly control markets or resources.

Together, these organizational and production arrangements have enabled the group to generate significant economic returns and value addition.

Economic Impact

The Akoub Women's Group has generated significant and diversified economic returns for its members through seasonal production, value addition, and off-season income activities.

During the harvesting season (approximately 5 months), the women harvested and marketed an average of 9,000 kg of Akoub across 15 dunums. In 2025, total income from Akoub production (unprocessed, cleaned, and frozen combined) reached approximately 620,000 NIS (£155,000). This reflects strong value addition, as cleaning and freezing substantially increased market value compared to unprocessed sales.

Beyond the harvest period, women diversified income through off-season activities that would otherwise not have generated earnings. Seed production carried out by the group in 2025 generated a total of 19,000 NIS (£5,553) in the following year. In addition, one participant independently produced and sold approximately 15,000 seedlings, generating approximately 10,500 NIS (£3,069). These off-season activities provided an important source of income during periods of low agricultural activity.

Overall, the results highlight that combining seasonal production with value addition and off-season diversification significantly strengthens income generation and resilience. While current earnings remain supplementary rather than sufficient to fully sustain households, the model shows strong potential for scaling—particularly through expanding seedling production among more women—offering a pathway toward more stable, year-round livelihoods.

The income generated by these activities has tangible, transformative effects on the women's households.



It contributes to covering essential needs, supporting children's education, and improving financial stability, while also enhancing women's decision-making power within their households. At the community level, the group has created additional employment opportunities by hiring local women for cleaning and processing activities. Furthermore, the group's reputation for high-quality seeds and seedlings has attracted farmers from other governorates, who now place direct orders, reflecting growing market trust and recognition.

Social Impact

Before joining the women's group, most members were confined to traditional roles within their households, with limited influence over family income or community affairs. In rural West Bank contexts, men are typically seen as landowners and decision-makers, while women's contributions remain informal and undervalued. The Akoub Women's Group challenged these norms by creating a collective space where women could cultivate their own plots, share knowledge, and support one another. Over time, some husbands have begun assisting their wives in farm activities, reflecting a gradual shift toward shared responsibilities and recognition of women's economic contributions.

The group has become a strong source of solidarity and mutual support. Members mentor each other on cultivation, processing, and marketing techniques, exchange advice on planting schedules, and work together to address challenges.



While each woman continues to manage her own plot and income independently, the group provides a platform for collective learning, coordination, encouragement, and leadership. This shared support has not only reduced isolation but also strengthened resilience, helping women cope with stress, build self-esteem, and assert their voice in their households and community. Members who once felt invisible in agricultural work have gained the confidence to make decisions, negotiate with suppliers, and manage sales.

Beyond the immediate benefits to members, the initiative is generating broader social impacts in the wider community. Women from neighboring communities occasionally collaborate with the group, learning cultivation and processing techniques and gaining practical skills. The group's effective management and organization have earned recognition from other farmers, expanding women's social networks and visibility across the governorate.



Environmental Impact

The Akoub Women's Group's cultivation model has also reduced environmental pressures compared to traditional harvesting practices. By domesticating Akoub close to their homes, the women avoid overharvesting wild populations, which protects a culturally important and ecologically significant native plant. This approach directly contributes to biodiversity conservation and ensures a sustainable supply for future generations.

The use of drip irrigation instead of traditional surface irrigation conserves water, which is critical adaptation to the limited water access experienced in the West Bank. Drip systems extend the harvest period from three to five months, optimize plant health, and minimize soil erosion and nutrient loss. By working closer to home and relying less on outside resources, the initiative should reduce transport-related environmental footprint by shortening travel distances for harvesting and processing. Together, these practices create a more climate-resilient, resource-efficient production model that safeguards both livelihoods and ecosystems.



Lessons Learned

The Akoub initiative demonstrates that the main innovation is not the crop itself, which is already part of Palestinian cultural heritage, but the way it is organized and managed. Shifting from informal wild harvesting to structured cultivation near women's homes proved essential for improving safety, ensuring consistent participation, and enabling more reliable production.

A key lesson is that organizing production at group level, combined with basic inputs and technical support, can transform a traditional practice into a stable income-generating activity. Processing activities such as cleaning, freezing, and packaging added value beyond seasonal harvesting, increasing market opportunities and income potential.

The collective structure of the women's groups also strengthened access to inputs, improved knowledge exchange, and enhanced their ability to engage with markets. This shows that the replicability of the model lies not in introducing a new crop, but in organizing existing local knowledge and practices into a structured, market-oriented and climate-resilient production system led by women, creating a scalable and sustainable model for climate-smart, inclusive agriculture.



CONCLUSION

The Akoub Women's Group is an emerging model for women's empowerment, resilience, and climate-smart livelihoods in the West Bank. In a context of fragility and economic uncertainty, the group demonstrates how collective action can transform vulnerability into opportunity through income generation, leadership, and sustainable resource management. While still relatively small, it has strong potential to expand and serve as a model for other rural communities.

Beyond income generation, the initiative shows how women-led collective action can strengthen household resilience, preserve biodiversity, and contribute to gradual shifts in gender norms. By linking community production to wider market opportunities and strengthening women's role within local value chains, it supports more inclusive and resilient agricultural systems.

Oxfam, together with RWDS, has supported this evolution by strengthening the enabling environment and helping shape the initiative into a more structured and potentially replicable model, without direct involvement in day-to-day implementation.

Looking ahead, the model can be expanded to other communities and adapted to different crops and value chains, with further improvements in cultivation practices, water management, and market access. This would enhance both sustainability and women's economic leadership across rural agricultural systems.

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