



Until we are all equal



# Strengthening Women's Entrepreneurship in Egypt (SWEET)

Breaking down the barriers to equality and economic justice

## Project facts

**WHO:** Women working in the handmade carpet and handicraft industry in Giza, Egypt. The project is funded primarily by Global Affairs Canada, with support from individual Canadian donors, and aims to reach more than 7,000 people, including 5,000 girls and women.

**WHAT:** The SWEET project focuses on promoting leadership and economic opportunities for women.

**WHERE:** Giza Governorate, Egypt

**WHEN:** This is Year 4 of a six-year project.

**WHY:** The main goals of the project are to:

1. Improve the realization of women's and girls' right to economic participation.
2. Address unequal power relations between genders and improve the social status of women and adolescent girls by expanding their vocational knowledge, providing them with business and technical skills that enhance their economic empowerment.
3. Support the agency of women and adolescent girls to exercise decisions regarding their economic rights.
4. Promote systemic changes in government and the private sector that support gender equality and women's right to secure work.



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Youth leaders Farida and Ahmed are passionate advocates in their communities.

**ON THE COVER** At a workshop in Giza, women including Sallouha (at left) learn how to work on looms before moving on to practical training. Iman (far right) works with another woman on a loom.

**Left:** Nora also got hands-on experience at the workshop.

## The First Word

Supporting women's access to economic opportunities strengthens communities.

The women involved in the Strengthening Women Entrepreneurs in Egypt (SWEET) project are challenging entrenched societal norms that limit them to domestic roles. They are pursuing their aspirations and providing support to their families, and they're actively engaged in community development.

Through your invaluable support for this project, you are conveying a powerful message to the world: When women have an opportunity to earn an income, it not only enhances their families' financial well-being but also grants them access to essential education and health care services. It strengthens the economy, as women bring fresh perspectives, unique talents and innovative ideas to businesses and industries. Enabling women to earn an income is a significant stride toward creating a more inclusive world where everyone can thrive.

### THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

Thanks to your generosity, more than 4,700 people, including 3,500 women and girls, have been able to participate in the SWEET project so far.

In this report, you'll meet four remarkable individuals whose stories demonstrate the transformative power of



Shaymaa works on a carpet loom with other women.

your support. Radwa's journey from an early marriage to entrepreneurship in Egypt's carpet industry (page 8), Omar's shift in perspective on gender equality through the SWEET project (page 9) and Farida and Ahmed's advocacy for gender equality in their communities (page 10) demonstrate the resilience and determination of individuals breaking free from traditional norms to pursue a brighter future.

Your ongoing partnership is crucial as we continue to break down barriers and create opportunities for women to thrive. Thank you for your unwavering support and commitment to progress and equality.

**Thank you for your continued support.**

# The Situation

With your support, we're weaving a brighter future with women.

Carpet weaving in Egypt has a rich and extensive history, stretching back as far as the pyramids and the Great Sphinx of Giza. During the Islamic period, carpet weaving evolved into an art form that reflected Islamic culture and aesthetics. Egyptian carpets are particularly prized for their intricate designs and high-quality materials and have been coveted for centuries by collectors and buyers worldwide.

Carpet weaving continues to be an important industry in Egypt, with women artisans responsible for most of the creative work. Unfortunately, women rarely see the full fruits of their labour, as cultural and social norms restrict their ability to move freely and limit their ability to take advantage of opportunities to enhance their skills. They also face difficulties in accessing business and financial services, which leads to limited involvement in the production processes.

The Egyptian government is trying to help. Egypt became the first country in the world to introduce a national strategy for the empowerment of women. In 2022, a law was passed requiring companies to ensure equal pay for men and women in the same job roles. The government has also launched various initiatives to boost women's economic capacity and create more job opportunities.

Despite this, the women involved in the carpet industry



Women artisans weave intricate designs into their carpets.

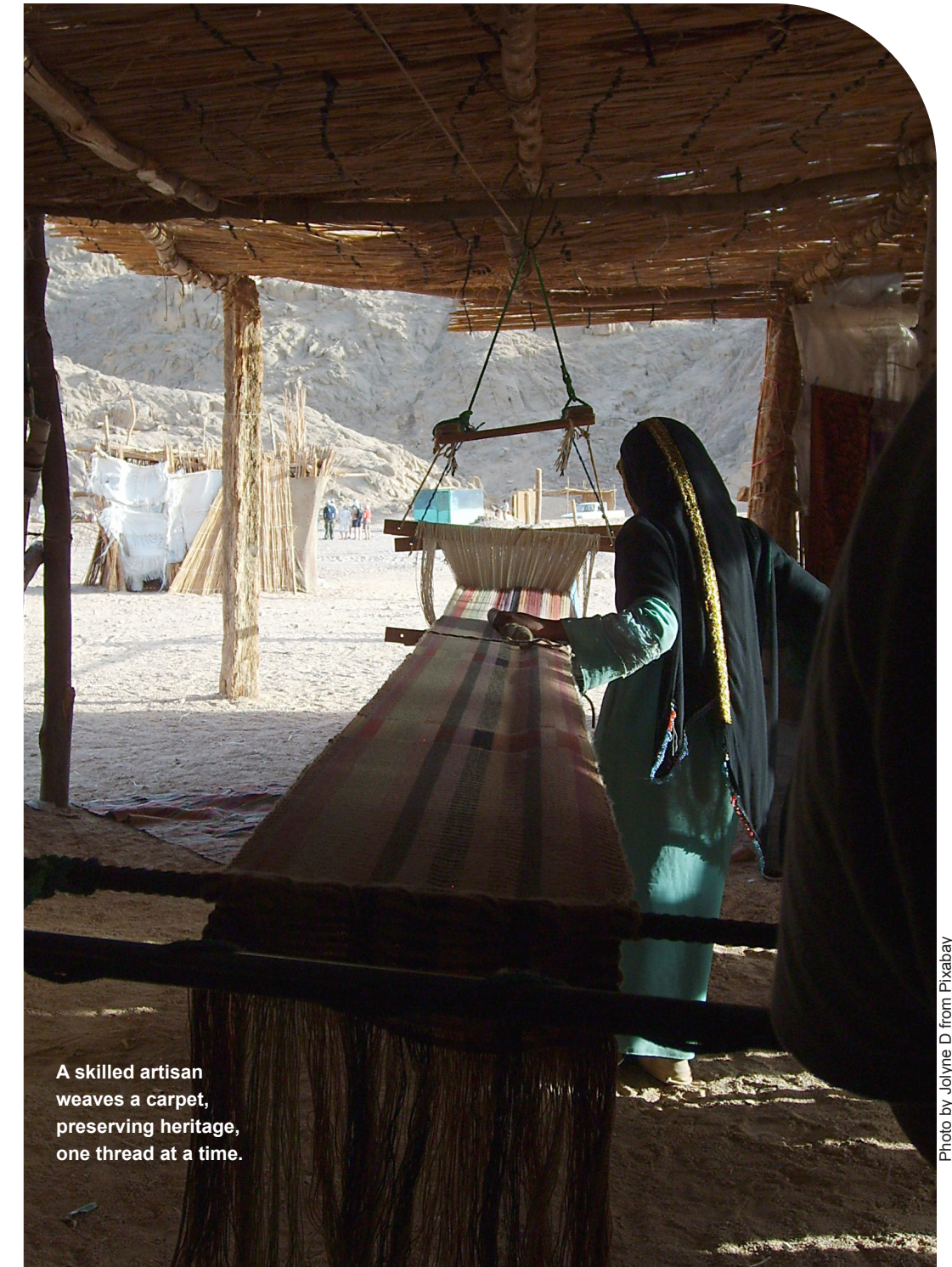
continue to face serious challenges. In recent years, they have been hit hard by significant hikes in inflation and a drop in tourist numbers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism in Giza normally accounts for 90% of the carpet market. This is why economic support for women is so vital. The SWEET project enables them to acquire financial literacy and teaches them business skills, helping them gain confidence in making informed economic decisions for themselves and their families.

Understanding borrowing and saving is essential for economic stability, which is why the SWEET project emphasizes savings groups. This is where women come together and save small amounts of money regularly as a group. They can also borrow money on flexible terms when they need it. Some groups also contribute to a social fund, which works like a form of insurance and can help cover

emergency costs. The groups are run by their members, and they are designed to keep going on their own after a year of training.

Financial and business literacy is transformative for women, opening a world of possibilities that was previously hidden from them. In strained economic times such as these, this knowledge gives women the flexibility to pivot to different and more immediately lucrative paths, while savings and smart borrowing act as much-needed safety nets for them and their families.

Egypt's economic challenges are far from over, with inflation stubbornly rising to record highs. But the tourists are slowly returning to the pyramids, and with them, a healthier carpet market. With their ever-increasing business acumen, the women of Giza are looking forward to a bright financial future in the years to come.



A skilled artisan weaves a carpet, preserving heritage, one thread at a time.

“They [women participating in the project] start to count on one another. They become family, and that is really empowering.”

– Maria Paula, economic empowerment advisor, Plan International Canada

# The Rundown

By the Numbers

Increased awareness of gender equality, reduced violence at home and substantial financial gains by savings groups: These results reflect the SWEET project's impact on individuals and communities. Here's what we accomplished in Year 4:

> **1,540** women attended capacity-building sessions on gender equality and rights and decision making around issues that affect their lives and economic rights and opportunities.

> **1,000** adolescent girls participated in Champions of Change groups and learned about economic engagement, including leadership and self-esteem.

> **1,000** women and adolescent girls received gender-responsive financial education and training in autonomous decision making.

> **278** men learned about gender equality, women and girls' rights, domestic roles and responsibilities, women's economic decision making and the rejection of gender-based violence through Transformative Masculinities training.

“After attending the Transformative Masculinities training, I participated in household chores including buying groceries, caring for my children and taking them to school.”

– Aly, 53 years old, project participant



The landscape in Giza



Project manager Nermin Nasser (left) in discussion with Mabrouk, the lead trainer

“I never used to think about investing or having additional income, because I didn't have extra money. But now I have learned how to start my own business, how to borrow money and how to repay it.”

– Hanan, 31 years old, project participant

A STORY OF CHANGE

# From Homemaker to Entrepreneur

Radwa's determination propelled her beyond the constraints that once defined her life.

Like many of the women in the handmade carpet industry, Radwa married young – so young that she didn't finish school. With four children and a husband, her life seemed defined by these roles.

"I didn't feel confident about my skills," she admits. "I knew I was good at raising children, but I never thought I would be able to do anything else."

Radwa's husband, like many others in Egypt, didn't feel it was acceptable for her to venture out on her own, even to the market. He did, however, support her joining the all-women initiatives that were being offered by the SWEET project. That was when everything began to change.

Radwa became a part of a savings group, a key component of the project. As she started saving, she felt a new sense of possibility. For the first time, she had her own money that she could use in whatever ways she wanted.

When COVID-19 hit, tourists stopped coming to Giza. Radwa had an idea for a small business that she could invest

in with the money she had saved. She started buying chickens and freezing and selling them. With this business, she could set her own price, which allowed her to save and buy more.

Maria Paula, an economic empowerment advisor for Plan International Canada, met Radwa on a visit to the SWEET project. She remembers it vividly.

"We were in a little blue room – the walls were painted blue – and Radwa's eyes lit up when she spoke about her business. She was so proud that she had pulled it all together on her own. She told me, 'If I can do this, I can do anything.'"

With Radwa's business now generating income, her husband has become more supportive of her going to the market. Radwa is about to start the next phase of the SWEET project, where she will be trained in business and marketing skills, and she's excited for the future.

"If this is what I am doing now," she says, "just imagine what I can do with a carpet business or something bigger!"



Project participants work side by side at a carpet workshop.

“If I can do this, I can do anything.”

– Radwa, a project participant

“Everything at home is just so peaceful and in harmony now.”

– Omar, a project participant

A STORY OF CHANGE

# A Change of Heart

When Omar's perspective on gender equality shifted, it ushered in a newfound sense of harmony on the home front.

Omar always believed that women should stay at home. He would not allow his wife, Aisha, to go to the market, because, he says, "What would she do there?" He also would never have thought of letting her get a job. "Why would she need to do that?" he asked, "and what would it say about me?"

But when Omar began participating in the SWEET project's Champions of Change training, which seeks to raise awareness among men and boys about gender equality, the experience changed his whole outlook. Aisha is now working; she has joined a savings group and will soon start receiving vocational and business training.

Omar admits that before, he had not realized the importance of considering Aisha's voice and perspective. Now, they make household decisions as a couple. Given how difficult it can be to change cultural conventions, this may sound too simple to be true. But Omar has an honest explanation.

"It is convenient for me," says Omar. "Everything at home is just so peaceful and in harmony now. Everything works so well, and when we're working together, we have more things to talk about when we have dinner."

He says he hadn't realized that sharing household

power with his wife would also be good for him. And he did not understand how much happier it would make her. Their improved home environment also positively impacts their children.

Aisha's working also means more money for the household budget. However, she doesn't use all of her income for that purpose. The SWEET project aims to give women control over their lives, so Aisha sets aside some of her earnings for savings. Now, if she wants to go to the doctor, for example, she has the means to do so without asking for help. But the extra income does help the whole family, and Omar says it eases the burden on him.

After all those years of believing that men and women must function one way, and against the odds, Omar has seen the value of changing these beliefs for greater harmony at home.

A STORY OF CHANGE

# Champions of Change

Passionate advocates are breaking down entrenched norms that sustain gender inequality.

In the villages of the Giza Governorate, gender inequality and the enforcement of traditional gender roles persist. Girls, boys and young women are rarely listened to, and their participation in public life is restricted.

Farida and Ahmed have both experienced violence tied to gender norms in their households and communities. Farida's older brother strictly controlled her and her sisters, restricting what they could do, often through physical abuse. In Ahmed's community, adolescent boys model violence, constantly cursing and fighting. It is an atmosphere that left Ahmed feeling angry all the time.

Farida and Ahmed both found hope and support through the Champions of Change program, designed to give young entrepreneurs the tools to thrive. As the sessions progressed, Farida's confidence grew, to the point where she could confront her brother and challenge his control. She even persuaded her father to support her. She has now begun taking part in social activities that she was not allowed to before. She has also discovered a passion and talent for writing and has decided that she will become a writer and a psychiatrist.

"The Champions of Change program was an incredibly beneficial journey," Farida explains. "It helped me overcome challenges at home, and it transformed my negative personality into a determined one. I started expressing my emotions through writing, and I now believe in my own beauty. I won't be silenced anymore."

Ahmed discovered the program through a Youth Parliament that he participated in. He acquired skills to manage his anger and now actively promotes peace among his peers. He has also refined his public speaking skills and was selected to participate in a simulation of the House of Representatives, where he spoke about climate change.

"I became the driver of my own life, influencing positive change and promoting gender equality," Ahmed says. "The program enabled me to take on leadership roles and realize the importance of women's roles beyond household chores."

Both Farida and Ahmed are now passionate advocates in their communities. Ahmed believes that a shift in perspective can help young people improve relationships, while Farida offers a powerful message to girls seeking to challenge oppressive social conventions. She tells them: "Don't fear the harm. The more you try to hide from the outside world, the more you will be hurt."

“  
I now believe in  
my own beauty. I  
won't be silenced  
anymore.”

– Farida, a project  
participant



Hennaweya  
participates in a  
workshop as part of  
the SWEET project.

## Looking Ahead

Thank you for joining us as we support women in Giza in gaining financial confidence and independence. Year 5 is set to be even more inspiring, as business and marketing skills will equip women to control more of the production and selling of their goods. With your support, we will continue to improve the economic participation of women and girls and engage boys and men to address unequal power relations, promote gender equality and change social norms.

**Thank you again for your continued support.**



Until we are all equal



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The SWEET project promotes women's economic independence through training and skills development in handmade carpets and handicrafts.

For more information,  
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## About Plan International Canada

Plan International Canada is a member of a global organization dedicated to advancing children's rights and equality for girls. Plan International has been building powerful partnerships with and for children for over 85 years and is now active in more than 80 countries. We stand with children, especially girls, wherever they are oppressed, exploited, left behind or not equally valued. We're determined optimists, and we will continue to persevere **until we are all equal**.