



## Europe and Central Asia Gender Newsletter

May 2025 — Issue #18



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### Highlights from FAO's gender initiatives across Europe and Central Asia

This edition's highlights include an interview with Nabil Gangi, FAO Deputy Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia, and the launch of the *Voices for Gender Equality in Europe and Central Asia* podcast series. It features the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Regional Forum on Sustainable Development 2025, in which the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) played an active role in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment across the region. Other stories spotlight the celebration of International Women's Day with women dairy farmers in Georgia and the "Blossoming Aigul" project in Kyrgyzstan, which places women at the forefront of climate resilience and peacebuilding. The edition also showcases FAO's collaboration with civil society partners, including the Union of Hungarian Women, and inspiring examples of women's leadership in agrobiodiversity conservation in Tajikistan and community empowerment in Kyrgyzstan.

### Interview with Nabil Gangi, FAO Deputy Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia

This year's International Women's Day, with the theme "For ALL women and girls: Rights. Equality. Empowerment", offered an important reminder of the critical role women

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play in shaping agrifood systems. In an interview for the event, Nabil Gangi, FAO Deputy Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia, highlighted how empowering women is central to building agrifood systems that are efficient, sustainable, resilient – and inclusive, ensuring that no one is left behind.



Nabil Gangi, FAO Deputy Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia.

Across the region, FAO has been working to address the systemic inequalities that limit women's full participation in agriculture. As Nabil Gangi pointed out, tools such as the Country Gender Assessments (CGAs) have helped uncover barriers and opportunities that might otherwise be missed. In Georgia, for example, the CGA highlighted significant gender gaps in landownership, leading to initiatives that are helping women secure their rights and strengthen agricultural value chains.

Nabil Gangi also stressed the powerful role that women-led cooperatives and associations can play in transforming rural communities. In Türkiye, in the aftermath of the devastating 2023 earthquake, the FAO-supported Samandağ Women's Cooperative managed to scale-up operations, helping their constituencies to sustain their livelihoods by producing and marketing local food products. Similarly, in Armenia, the "Berd Bean" Women's Association established by women farmers is moving towards organic farming, opening the door to higher-value markets and better incomes.

For more insights from Nabil Gangi on these efforts, read the full interview<sup>1</sup>.

## New podcast series: *Voices for Gender Equality in Europe and Central Asia*

The FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia has launched a new podcast series, *Voices for Gender Equality in Europe and Central Asia*, offering fresh perspectives on how FAO is working to empower women and promote gender equality across the region. Aimed at FAO staff,

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fao.org/europe/news/detail/rural-women-are-the-backbone-of-agrifood-systems-across-europe-and-central-asia/en>


development partners, and those involved in agrifood systems programming and policy, the series creates a space to explore how gender can be meaningfully integrated into projects, policies and everyday practice.

Through engaging conversations with experts and voices from the field, the podcast serves as a platform to exchange experiences and good practices to inform more inclusive and effective development work.



The podcast "Voices for Gender Equality" explores FAO's work to empower rural women across Europe and Central Asia.

In the first episode, host and Gender Officer Marianna Bicchieri is joined by Dono Abdurazakova, Senior Gender and Social Protection Advisor, and Anna Jenderedjian, Gender and Social Protection Specialist, for a conversation on FAO's gender-related work in the region. The episode also features Raimund Jehle, Regional Programme Leader, who emphasizes the central role of women's empowerment in building resilient and sustainable agrifood systems.


 Listen to Episode 1.<sup>2</sup>

The second episode shifts the focus to practical experiences on the ground. Zhanyl Bozayeva, Programme Officer, Team Leader and Gender Focal Point at the FAO Partnership and Liaison Office in Kazakhstan, explores the initiatives that are making tangible differences in rural communities by reaching out to women.

Zhanyl Bozayeva brings a personal and professional lens to gender equality in rural development. Reflecting on the cultural meaning of her own name, she opens a conversation about deep-rooted gender stereotypes – and how her work now challenges them. Through a project funded by the Global Environment Facility in Koram village, Zhanyl Bozayeva shares how a group of socially vulnerable women was supported with training and greenhouses to grow vegetables year-round, boosting their incomes and resilience. The episode also focuses on women in

<sup>2</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/unfao/episode-1/s-WXeJcZQhzVM?in=unfao/sets/voices-for-gender-equality-in//s-nUe8KERITPI>

agricultural science and the need to create spaces where their expertise is fully recognized.

 Listen to Episode 2.<sup>3</sup>

## FAO amplifies rural women's voices at the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development 2025

At the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development 2025, FAO played an active role in key discussions on advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in agrifood systems across Europe and Central Asia.

On 1 April 2025, FAO co-organized the side event “Balancing home and farm: unlocking opportunities for women in rural areas of Europe and Central Asia” in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and in collaboration with the Associated Country Women of the World. In his opening remarks, Nabil Gangi, FAO Deputy Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia, highlighted the critical yet often invisible role that rural women play in agrifood systems. Klaus Beck, UNFPA Deputy Regional Director, emphasized that entrenched gender norms and unequal division of labour continue to limit rural women's autonomy and economic empowerment.

Representatives of civil society underscored the systemic barriers women face, and shared compelling examples of their resilience and avenues for support. Lela Bakradze, Georgia, highlighted successful initiatives, such as combining agricultural extension services with reproductive health awareness and mobile screening services in Georgia as part of a joint FAO and UNFPA initiative. Anna Sushko, Ukraine, shared an experience of ecological education and hands-on learning, which not only restored a sense of normalcy for displaced children in Romania, but also provided women with meaningful roles and community connection in their host country. Mavzuna Yaminova explained how rural women in Tajikistan bear the double burden of agricultural and domestic labour, often without access to land, finance or training. She highlighted inclusive orchard training and financial literacy mentoring as interventions that have successfully increased women's participation and income. Referring to context-specific interventions, Iluta Lāce described the experiences of innovative models of support for survivors of gender-based violence in Latvia and Uzbekistan. Ramona Duminicioiu, from Romania, brought a broader advocacy perspective, calling for gender-responsive and youth-oriented policies to address structural inequalities.

In the concluding segment of the side event, Gulnora Rakhimova, Deputy Minister of Economy and Finance of the Republic of Uzbekistan presented a compelling case

<sup>3</sup> <https://on.soundcloud.com/e2q42CUFkoASFVcB9>

for cross-sectoral initiatives – from improving women's access to land and social protection measures, education and finance, to including preferential measures for women entrepreneurs in the public procurement system. Quoting the President of Uzbekistan, the Deputy Minister concluded that “by improving the capacities of women, we improve the opportunities for all members of the family”.

On 3 April 2025, FAO led the side event “Re-imagining the future of women in food systems: harnessing science, technology and partnership to advance the SDGs”, co-organized with the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub, UNECE and other partners. As global progress towards gender equality slows, the session explored how innovation, inclusive policymaking and access to technology can help dismantle structural barriers for women in agrifood systems.



*Panellists at “Re-imagining the future of women in food systems,” Palais des Nations, Geneva.*

The event opened with welcoming remarks from Stefanos Fotiou, Director of the FAO Office of Sustainable Development Goals and the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub, and Raimund Jehle, FAO Regional Programme Leader and Co-Chair of the Issue-Based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems. Marianna Bicchieri, FAO Gender Officer, presented data on women's participation in agrifood systems in Europe and Central Asia, where they make up 41 percent of the agricultural workforce. Despite their contributions, women often work informally and lack access to services, training and decision-making.

The first panel, focused on policy perspectives, featured speakers from Georgia, Norway and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). Ekaterine Zviadadze of Georgia's Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture presented an FAO-supported initiative that enhanced women dairy producers' productivity by 65 percent through training, improved feeding practices and market access. Siri Lothe, from Norway's Ministry of Agriculture and Food, shared experiences on boosting women's leadership through mentorship programmes and cooperative networks, while noting the ongoing challenge of low landownership among women. Angela Corina of WMO addressed the climate–water–gender nexus and called for 40 percent

female representation across WMO structures and gender-responsive approaches in water governance.

The second panel discussion focused on innovative solutions from non-state actors. Valbona Mazreku from Milieukontakt in Albania shared a model for energy communities using solar-powered irrigation and women-led training in renewable energy. Rita Lousa from the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) emphasized successful women's innovation in the food tech sector, while highlighting ongoing barriers to finance and recognition. Aida Jamangulova of Kyrgyzstan's Agency of Development Initiatives presented the "Dyikan Muras" (Seed Guardians Network) initiative, a women-led network that empowers rural women by restoring local seed varieties and promoting sustainable farming. With over 700 members, it helps reduce reliance on imported seeds, supports climate resilience, and strengthens women's roles in agriculture through in-person and online training, seed banks and digital tools.



*Panellists at the FAO side event on women in food systems, Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland.*

The event concluded with reflections from Marit Nilsen, Secretary to the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards at UNECE, who reaffirmed that while gender gaps persist, meaningful progress is within reach through targeted policy, robust data and inclusive partnerships. Throughout the event, speakers emphasized that women are already leaders and co-creators of solutions, yet they remain largely unrecognized as such – something that must change.

Read more.<sup>4</sup> Watch the recording.<sup>5</sup>

## **“Blossoming Aigul”: women at the heart of climate resilience in Kyrgyzstan**

In Kyrgyzstan's Batken and Leilek districts, women are stepping into leadership roles to address some of the most pressing challenges facing their communities –

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fao.org/sustainable-development-goals-helpdesk/transform/news-detail/fao-s-participation-at-the-2025-unece-regional-forum-on-sustainable-development/en>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/live/7DhTtMD2qil>

climate change, environmental degradation and conflict over natural resources. The “Blossoming Aigul” project, funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund and implemented by FAO, UN Women and the Roza Otunbaeva Initiative, places women and local civil society organizations at the centre of climate action, sustainable agriculture and peacebuilding.

The project has already shown tangible results. A total of 621 people, 64 percent of them women, have been trained in climate-resilient agricultural practices. Women are leading efforts to restore degraded land and adopt sustainable solutions, including the planting of nearly 70 000 drought-resistant seedlings, the creation of artificial glaciers, and the installation of drip irrigation systems. A newly constructed reservoir now irrigates over 40 hectares of strawberry fields, and modern farming equipment is helping women increase productivity and boost their incomes.

Looking ahead, the project will continue to strengthen women's leadership in disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation planning. By involving women directly in developing local strategies and practical solutions, “Blossoming Aigul” is building more resilient, inclusive communities, where women are central to sustainable development and lasting peace.

## **Celebrating International Women's Day with women dairy farmers in Georgia**



*Georgian women are accessing grants to upgrade equipment and premises for improved food safety standards.*

To mark International Women's Day, representatives from FAO, the European Union Delegation and Sweden joined local women dairy farmers in Tsalka, Georgia, for a hands-on celebration of progress in rural women's empowerment. The event featured a model cheese-making session and showcased practical elements of FAO's food safety training for small-scale dairy producers.

During the event, the women agricultural producers prepared Halloumi cheese alongside representatives

from the European Union, Sweden and FAO, while also demonstrating milk quality tests, which are key practices taught through FAO's Farmer Field School.

Under the European Union- and Sweden-funded ENPARD IV programme, participating women farmers have gained technical knowledge and received financial support to improve hygiene and quality in dairy production. To date, FAO has trained over 3 000 women dairy farmers on food safety. Of these, 221 are accessing matching grants to adapt their equipment and premises for improved food safety standards. As a result, they are now better equipped and have the knowledge to produce safer dairy goods. Moreover, the smallholder women producers who have purchased food safety-related dairy equipment with the matching grants are improving both their production efficiency and quality.

Read more.<sup>6</sup> Watch the video.<sup>7</sup>

## Championing rural women: meeting the Union of Hungarian Women

FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative Viorel Gutu and FAO Gender Officer Marianna Bicchieri welcomed Margit Batthyány-Schmidt, President of the Union of Hungarian Women (UHW), and Mónika Alíz Mészáros, member of UHW, to discuss enhancing collaboration on rural women's empowerment. The meeting reaffirmed the long-standing partnership

between FAO and UHW, a key advocate for gender equality across Central Europe.



*FAO and UHW representatives meet to strengthen collaboration on gender equality and rural women's empowerment.*

Margit Batthyány-Schmidt, who brings extensive experience from her work in the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture, shared recent initiatives led by UHW, including its leadership in organizing Hungary's national observance of the International Day of Rural Women.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.fao.org/georgia/news/detail-events/en/c/1734583/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGfEelUxhQ>

These events have created meaningful spaces for awareness-raising and dialogue with national stakeholders and international partners, including FAO. The union's active role in agricultural advocacy is further reflected in its ties to Copa-Cogeca and WEGate, and its consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Discussions focused on expanding joint efforts in policy dialogue, capacity building and inclusive rural development. Both parties expressed a strong commitment to ensuring that rural women's voices are heard and their contributions fully recognized in transforming agrifood systems across the region.

## Women in Tajikistan spearheading agrobiodiversity



*Gulrukhsor Nozimova manages a vibrant seed bank that supports women in her community.*

When Gulrukhsor Nozimova began collecting seeds in her village in Tajikistan's Rasht district, she was driven by a growing concern that traditional crop varieties were gradually disappearing. Local types of wheat, corn and pumpkin, once common, were becoming harder to find, and fewer people were saving seeds or using the farming practices passed down through generations. She wanted to ensure that these varieties, and the knowledge behind them, wouldn't disappear.

In a context where rural populations have seen major shifts, driven by labour migration, economic change and increasing responsibilities for women in agriculture, Gulrukhsor's initiative responded to a growing need in her community. At first, she stored the seeds in a small room at home, sharing them informally. But without proper equipment or guidance, it was difficult to maintain them year after year.

That changed when Gulrukhsor received support through the "Facilitating agrobiodiversity conservation and sustainable use to promote food and nutritional resilience in Tajikistan" project, implemented by FAO and funded by the Global Environment Facility. With training, storage materials and technical advice, she transformed her modest seed collection into a well-organized seed bank.

Today, it supports women in her village and nearby areas, contributing to the project's broader reach of 765 women across Tajikistan. The space has become more than just a storehouse: it's a place where women exchange seeds, learn new techniques and support one another.

Across Tajikistan, rural women often face limited access to resources, training and agricultural inputs. With a large share of men migrating abroad for work, women have taken on greater roles in agrifood systems, often without the support or recognition needed to thrive.

Recognizing women's frequently overlooked contributions to agriculture, the initiative adopted a gender-responsive approach from the outset. "Intentionality is fundamental", explained Khurshed Kholov, FAO National Project Coordinator, adding that "through gender analysis, we identified women's critical roles, from planting to selling produce, and tailored our support accordingly, introducing practical technologies like solar dryers and providing training in seed preservation".

As a result, the project has contributed to increased incomes for women, earning over TJS 7 600 (Tajik somoni) in 2024 (equivalent to around USD 760) through the use of solar dryers for berries, fruit and vegetables.

With better harvests, more effective storage practices, and new opportunities to earn income, local women are improving their livelihoods and gaining confidence in their roles as farmers and leaders. What began as a personal effort to protect local traditions has grown into a powerful example of how, when given the right support, rural women can lead community-driven solutions that preserve biodiversity and strengthen the future of agriculture.

## How one woman can improve the lives of a whole community in Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan's mountainous Toguz-Toro district, Gulbakhira Botokanova is showing how local leadership can make a lasting impact. A preschool educator and active community leader, she is helping build a more climate-resilient future by improving the lives of women around her.

Her efforts are part of the "Carbon Sequestration through Green Climate Investments in Forests and Pastures of the Kyrgyz Republic" project, led by FAO in partnership with the Government of Kyrgyzstan and funded by the Green Climate Fund. The project supports sustainable forest and pasture management while empowering rural communities.

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*Gulbakhira Botokanova brought women from her community together through the district's annual volleyball tournament.*

As Chairperson of her local Community Landscape Management Group, Gulbakhira has been a driving force in bringing together local authorities, forestry services and residents to manage natural resources and tackle local climate challenges. As a community leader and mother of five, she knows firsthand the everyday struggles at the local level. From the outset of the project, she took an active role in championing the inclusion of women and proposing concrete ideas for community development. Thanks to her leadership, women in her district have meaningful opportunities for income-generating initiatives such as fruit cultivation and dairy processing. These efforts support environmental goals while creating new economic opportunities for rural families.

Alongside her work on climate and natural resource management, she continues to promote women's well-being and engagement in community life, securing free sanatorium treatments and organizing the district's annual women's volleyball tournament.

"If we want change", Gulbakhira says, "we, as women, must be part of it. Every step we take is a step towards the future, towards preserving and enhancing our natural resources".

Read Gulbakhira's full story.<sup>8</sup>

### Acknowledgements

The Gender Team at the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia would like to thank all gender focal points across FAO offices. Special thanks are extended to the many women and men who shared their stories with us.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.fao.org/countryprofiles/news-archive/detail-news/en/c/1734576/>



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