



Europe and Central Asia Gender Newsletter

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The war in Ukraine is severely affecting women, children and poor households

The war in Ukraine has caused extensive damage and loss of life in the country. Nearly one-third of Ukrainians have been displaced and 5.6 million refugees, mostly women, have sought refuge in neighbouring countries and Europe.¹ The war has resulted in a massive and deteriorating food insecurity situation, and has disrupted livelihoods during the agricultural growing season in Ukraine. It has also affected global food security.

In response to this crisis, and in line with the *Rapid Response Plan for Ukraine*,² FAO Headquarters organized two training sessions on 19 May 2022 and 8 June 2022 for staff based in the country on Accountability to Affected Populations, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, and FAO Gender Policy to integrate gender in the project cycle.

The FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia Working Group on Implications of the Ukraine Crisis has been regularly monitoring the developments. While gender analysis is often missing, the data and forecasts show that soaring input and food prices, and increased market uncertainties, disproportionately affect poor households, women and children.

¹ The UNHCR Flash Updates are available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

² The Rapid Response Plan March–December 2022 is available at <https://www.fao.org/3/cb9457en/cb9457en.pdf>.

To identify the impacts of the war, the Inter-agency Regional Gender Taskforce for the Ukraine Refugee Situation is developing a Regional Rapid Gender Analysis covering gender, gender based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and women's participation and leadership in Ukraine and bordering countries. The analysis is scheduled for release by mid-autumn 2022.

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How agroecology improves food sovereignty for women and men in the region



The agrobiodiversity festival hosted by Gradina Moldovei

As expressed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, “Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right to determine their own food and agriculture systems, recognized by many States and regions as the right to food sovereignty”.³

Communities across Europe and Central Asia strive to determine their own food and agriculture systems, including through the preservation of indigenous seeds to sharing crops and protecting animals in times of war. FAO and Schola Campesina Aps, an international agroecology school based in Italy, collaborated with the Albanian Network for Rural Development and Gradina Moldovei (Garden of Moldova) in two webinars (9 June 2022⁴ and 17 June 2022⁵) to showcase innovative and inclusive practices that aim to achieve food sovereignty in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, respectively. The events demonstrated how agroecology initiatives and networks can deliver holistic responses to the environmental, social and economic crises facing rural populations today. Agroecological responses in the region include:

- Supporting **family farming** through promoting traditional know-how and local crops;
- Realizing **women’s leadership** in agriculture and rural development;
- **Convening** women and men to share knowledge and experiences on food systems;
- Promoting local products and connecting them with **markets** through events and festivals;

³ The Declaration is available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1650694>.

⁴ The concept note for the webinar featuring practices in the Western Balkans is available at <https://www.scholacampesina.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Western-Balkans-Webinar.pdf>.

⁵ The webinar recording is available at https://youtu.be/nXqfY1afV_o.

- Delivering **grants**, for example, for rainwater collection, greenhouse installation and drip irrigation;
- Helping establish **collectives and cooperatives**, and promoting cooperation among cooperatives;
- **Mobilizing** rural people with multiple constraints such as marginalized groups, those living in underserved and remote areas, victims of domestic violence, displaced people, disabled people, and households with disabled members;
- Providing agricultural **advice** for crop diversification, soil rehabilitation, crop rotation and plant protection;
- Establishing local **seed banks** to preserve and multiply local seeds with higher nutritional values and greater compatibility with local climates; and
- Assisting **displaced communities** by hosting animals that are left behind, continuing production during war and promoting a green post-war recovery.

This comprehensive agenda is a product of collective action and the agroecology movement within the region, which thrives with local networks. We interviewed Ana Beniel Coutinho from the Republic of Moldova’s local network Gradina Moldovei, who led the organization of the webinar in Eastern Europe:

“Networks provide access to information. There are motivated individuals in different locations, but none can learn and practise agroecology alone. Networks provide access to resources such as local seeds. In networks, people can find their peers with unique strengths who are willing to share and collaborate. This is why agroecology has become a social movement.”

Women often lead agroecology movements in Europe and Central Asia, and this fact helps to explain why agroecology is an important tool for achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment in rural areas. Agroecology empowers women in the following three major ways.

First, agroecology recognizes and addresses the specific needs and priorities of women. Women often have inadequate time and access to resources. Agroecology connects people with the complex system of nature and supports people to save their time and resources. Ana Beniel Coutinho elaborates upon this approach:

“In agroecology, we are not struggling against nature. We use what we have in nature. When I enter into my garden, I ask what I have instead of what I need and what I lack. When pests attack a crop, we do not always run to exterminate it. We allow the plant to develop immunity which makes the plant more nutritious and richer in antioxidants.”

Second, agroecology enables greater visibility for women. For instance, seed-saving is a meticulous but often overlooked form of work undertaken by women. Yet, “without seeds and without women’s labour, there is no agroecology,” Ana Benoliel Coutinho explains. Third, agroecology encourages women to share their unique knowledge and experiences with other women and men. She articulates this as a process of knowledge sharing and empowerment:

“Being able to listen actively and to be heard is key to building dignity and a unified society. It starts when one is self-aware of their inherent knowledge while being humble in listening to and learning from the others. On the other hand, when other men and women wonder, ask questions, listen to, and appreciate what they hear from a woman producer, the beautiful process of empowerment unfolds.”

In both of the webinars, the speakers emphasized that Europe and Central Asia needs to listen to rural women’s voices more than ever, as the region grapples with the devastation of the war in Ukraine. Anastasiya Volkova, who coordinates the Green Road of Ecovillages project in Ukraine, demonstrated how the ecovillages have expressed their solidarity with each other by continuing to cultivate and share even in times of war. Thus, agroecology continues to transcend borders and genders to help build peaceful bridges between people and nature.

Integrated community development under the spotlight



Gender-sensitive participatory planning is underway in a local community development project in the Republic of Moldova

The United Nations General Assembly declared 2019 to 2028 as the UN Decade of Family Farming (UNDF)⁶ to highlight the role of family farms, pastoralists and smallholders in achieving food security, and improved nutrition and livelihoods, and their ability to better manage natural resources and protect the environment, as well as to enhance inclusive and sustainable development.

⁶ The resolution is available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1479766?ln=en>.

To support the implementation of the UNDF, a Global Action Plan was developed in 2019 which stresses the importance of creating an enabling policy environment to strengthen family farming and recommends the implementation of country-driven, inclusive, participative and bottom-up activities to support family farmers.

In the run-up to the Global Forum of the UNDF, which will be hosted by the FAO–IFAD Joint Secretariat in September 2022, FAO, IFAD and UNDP co-organized a Regional Dialogue on the UNDF in Europe and Central Asia on 22–24 June 2022 in Budapest, Hungary.

In this regional event, Dono Abdurazakova, Senior Gender and Social Protection Adviser at FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, moderated a session on participation in integrated community development. During the session, workshop participants listened to three presentations on different subjects: leaving no one behind and gender equality by Anna Jenderedjian, Gender Mainstreaming and Social Protection Specialist at FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia; participatory rural appraisal by Francisco Sarmiento, Territorial Food Systems Specialist at FAO; and youth engagement by Paola Laini, Youth Representative of European Coordination Via Campesina. The session featured lively debates about different patterns and trends in young women’s and men’s outmigration in the subregions, the potential for local cooperation for women’s empowerment, and the promise of agricultural cooperatives in the region.

FAO Regional Conference for Europe convened for food-secure, sustainable and inclusive agrifood systems

The Thirty-third Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe brought together more than 50 FAO Members in Poland from 10 to 13 May 2022 to discuss food production, supplies and trade, even during times of war. The Regional Conference had a record number of participating countries and officials, signalling the importance of the multiple challenges that the region is facing, including the COVID 19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The Regional Conference reiterated the significance of gender equality and women’s empowerment to address the aggravated challenges in the region. In its final report⁷, the Regional Conference recommended that Members,

“improve the social sustainability and inclusivity of agrifood systems through gender- and age balanced approaches to empower women and youth as

⁷ The final report is available at <https://www.fao.org/3/nj289en/nj289en.pdf>.

agents of change in order to ensure sustainable rural development and equitable agrifood livelihoods in line with the framework of the United Nations Decade of Family Farming (UNDF), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.”

Reviewing FAO’s regional priorities and the results achieved in 2020 and 2021, the Regional Conference,

“...called upon FAO to step up efforts to better promote gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment in all activities across the region by generating sex-disaggregated data and by interweaving regional policies with the Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women’s and Girls’ Empowerment in the context of food security and nutrition,⁸ which are being developed by CFS [Committee on World Food Security].”

Additionally, considering the synthesis of FAO evaluations conducted in 2020 and 2021 in Europe and Central Asia, the Regional Conference called upon FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia to improve mainstreaming gender equality and women’s empowerment in all activities in the region.

How boosting women’s confidence helps to address community needs in Armenia



Anush Sargsyan in the newly grown grain fields

In Armenia, women’s participation in decision-making at the community level, especially in rural communities, is fairly low. According to the Country Gender Assessment of Armenia conducted in 2017, the principal reasons for their limited involvement in community leadership include gendered social norms, men’s lack of acceptance of women’s

⁸ The first draft of the voluntary guidelines is available at https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs2122/Gender/CFS_GEWE_VGs_First_Draft_en.pdf.

leadership, women’s fear of expressing themselves and a lack of self-confidence. Only a very small number of urban and rural municipalities are headed by women in Armenia. Our story is about one of these women – Administrative Head of Debet village of Lori region, Anush Sargsyan.

Anush is a 29-year-old woman. She is married, with two small daughters. She was appointed to the post of Administrative Head in January 2022. Around the same time, she was elected unanimously as the Chairperson of the Cooperative founded by farmers of Debet and its nearby rural settlements.

“Assuming such responsibilities required a high level of self confidence and excellent communication and negotiation skills to be able to work effectively with the local population, including men of various ages, characters and occupations. Additionally, it often required advanced knowledge related to agriculture,” Anush recalls. She underlines how she felt the need to improve her knowledge and skills to be more effective in communicating with the villagers, her colleagues and higher-level local authorities.

In March 2022, she joined one of the groups in Lori to identify the priorities and objectives of a future Local Action Group (LAG), to be formed as part of FAO’s Local Empowerment of Actors for Development (LEAD) project supported by the European Union. LAGs aim to lead community-driven development strategies based on the needs and opportunities identified by members of communities.

“If one asks me about the two main things that the LAG meetings gave to me, the first one would be the building of confidence in terms of leading to identify, prioritize and address community needs. The second would be the gaining of agricultural knowledge through exchange of experience and opinions with experts and representatives of other communities. The LEAD project mentors highly encouraged us to voice and share our thoughts, and it helped to reveal important issues in Debet that otherwise might have remained unnoticed,” says Anush while reflecting on the benefits of participating in LAG meetings.

Though the LAG formation activities are still ongoing, and the results of their actions are expected this autumn, Anush has already been able to make tangible achievements in addressing community needs. As a result of negotiating with villagers and convincing them to make investments, for the first time since Armenia’s independence 30 years ago, 5 ha of community lands have been cultivated and 15 ha more will be cultivated this autumn. Moreover, the community cooperative purchased a combine harvester which will help to collect the grain this August from the cultivated lands.

“In a country with a high level of poverty, it takes huge efforts to convince villagers to invest in agriculture in a community with very limited sources of income. But the meeting with LAG members and the consultations with the

experts of the LEAD project helped me to gain necessary knowledge and confidence for encouraging the community to do so,” Anush says.

Anush was glad to find out that the proposal of building water reservoirs for Debet and two neighbouring villages has been approved at its first stage and there are high chances that they will get funds from the LEAD project to implement this initiative. This will help to expand irrigation in these villages, opening up new opportunities for cultivating more land and earning greater income from farming.



Anush proudly showing the combine harvester newly purchased with the co-investment of the members of the village cooperative

“Now that the members of this and other communities see the first results of the actions led by me, they start trusting me more. This fact, in its turn, not only helps me to be more confident as a community leader, but also serves as a good example for other communities for overcoming gender stereotypes and entrusting women with managerial roles,” Anush reflects.

“After all, joining the efforts of all – men and women – is crucial for achieving success. As the proverb says, ‘If the village stands, it can break a trunk’, meaning that everything is easier to do if people unite. And that’s the motto of my work!” Anush adds, showing the writing on the Municipality Administration’s wall.

LEAD Project

Establishment of Local Action Groups is part of the LEAD Project⁹ supported by the European Union and implemented by FAO and the United Nations Development Programme in close partnership with Armenia’s Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure and Ministry of Economy. The four-year LEAD programme focuses on adapting and implementing the European Union’s LEADER methodology in the Lori and Tavush regions of Armenia and supports community-driven local and rural development initiatives carried out through partnerships uniting local authorities, civil society and the private sector.

⁹ The LEAD Programme details are available at <https://www.fao.org/armenia/news/detail-events/en/c/1380822>.

Empowering women in rural Azerbaijan: a practitioner’s approach



Leyla Jabbarli participating in a rural community meeting as part of the Women’s Economic Empowerment Project

Under the FAO–Azerbaijan Partnership Programme, in close cooperation with the Agro Credit and Development Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Azerbaijan (AKIA), FAO has been improving food security and rural livelihoods through the Women’s Economic Empowerment Project (WEP).

The project works with grassroots rural women to disseminate knowledge and skills in agricultural activities such as fruit and vegetable growing, beekeeping, poultry farming, cattle breeding and agrotourism, as well as in business management and entrepreneurship. Hundreds of women from various provinces of Azerbaijan gathered and joined forces to improve their technical skills, receive equipment, generate income and improve their livelihoods.

The project has three objectives which ensure its essential gender-mainstreaming aspects:

- Women and men have equal voice and decision making power in rural institutions.
- Women and men have equal rights, access to and control over resources and an equal share of the resulting income and benefits.
- Women’s work burden is alleviated through better access to technologies, practices and infrastructure and the more equitable distribution of responsibilities.

A hardworking team is transforming these words into action. Leyla Jabbarli, the national project coordinator and Deputy Chairperson of the Agro Credit and Development Agency under the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Azerbaijan, is a changemaker coordinating the project team on the ground. She explains their endeavour:

“We want to create a change. The stereotypes identifying women as cheap and invisible labour in

agriculture must change. The stereotype that rural women or young people cannot be executives or entrepreneurs in agriculture must change. Indeed, we have seen from ... childhood that our grandmothers and grandfathers [have] always worked shoulder to shoulder.”

In Azerbaijan, AKIA provides farmers with public subsidies and credits. Hence, the agency has a holistic approach towards agricultural production: from agricultural input provision to marketing of the products. The project has therefore improved the capacities of rural communities not only in agronomic topics but also in food storage, warehousing, packaging, logistics and marketing. Considering the land fragmentation in the country, AKIA also sought to maximize the impact of subsidies and support through promoting farmer’s organizations and cooperatives. Cooperation is rarely the fastest track. Yet through coordinated efforts, women tackled their prejudice about cooperative enterprises and started to communicate, negotiate and collaborate.

In addition, rural women built their technical capacities and organized under rural women’s associations. For example, in the city of Qakh in the north-west of Azerbaijan, young rural women producers joined forces to improve their beehives and hazelnut orchards and diversify their production through new business plans. Moreover, restaurants and cafes in Baku are now seeking the fresh fruits and jams of “Yaseman” and “Buta”, both women-led agri-enterprises in the Qakh region and each generating employment for ten other workers. As these examples show, with the right kinds of comprehensive support and advice, women-led businesses can thrive.

But what are the key challenges behind these success stories? Leyla Jabbarlı answers without hesitation:

“The biggest challenge was to gain people’s trust. Considering the past projects with limited sustainable outputs, people were pessimistic and sceptical. [In particular], older rural men had serious doubts at first. With effective communication, community engagement, and solid examples on the ground, they joined the project’s cause. We know that it is hard for many rural women to act without the consent of the men in the household. We therefore invited men to join the project activities to build consent.”

The issue of women’s empowerment extends beyond a simple antagonism between men and women. Women often need other women’s acceptance and encouragement as well. Leyla Jabbarlı recalls how new women entrepreneurs act like ambassadors within their communities when it comes to setting up a business and making a living out of agrifood production. Role models matter in social groups. When the most “left behind” women succeed in business, they inspire and mentor other women and men to take bold action.

The Women’s Economic Empowerment Project seeks to increase the number of women role models, especially among communities affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. According to Leyla Jabbarlı, ensuring women’s equal participation and voice in rural development is more important than ever. It is anticipated that there will be many new women-led success stories in Azerbaijan which will demonstrate women’s fair share in rural sustainable development, and the project will report on these as it progresses.

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For comments and suggestions, please contact us at the email REU-Gender@fao.org, also provided below.



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