



Food and Agriculture
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FAO-Türkiye Partnership Programmes

Leaving No One Behind: Greater Involvement and Empowerment of Rural Women in Türkiye and Central Asia

Transformative journeys of rural women from Türkiye



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Transformative journeys of rural women from Türkiye

In collaboration with the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MoAF), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is implementing the project “Leaving No One Behind: Greater Involvement and Empowerment of Rural Women in Türkiye and Central Asia” (LNOB), running from October 2021 to December 2024. This project aligns with FAO’s aim to reduce inequalities and improve livelihood opportunities by investing in women’s capacities and knowledge. Gender based inequalities have been identified as a major factor in the under performance of the agricultural sector.¹ Rural women face a range of challenges that stem from inequality in access to productive resources, information, services and markets.² These disparities are key indicators of being left behind in rural areas, where women are disproportionately affected. Addressing these inequalities is essential to unlocking rural women’s potential, which in turn enhances the productivity and sustainability of both agriculture and forestry.

In particular, the project aims to improve the socioeconomic status of rural women by supporting agricultural and forestry policies and programmes, and by creating sustainable economic opportunities at the grassroots level in the beneficiary countries of Türkiye, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. This is achieved through direct support for women’s entrepreneurial skills and providing policy advice to institutions involved in shaping agricultural and rural development programmes, in close partnership between FAO and MoAF.

For the project, Ordu, Kahramanmaraş and Burdur were selected in Türkiye as pilot provinces based on several key criteria, including their ranking in the Gender Inequality Index³, and low performance in women’s political and economic representation, and women’s participation in production and education. Additionally, these provinces have potential for marketing and tourism, thanks to their climate diversity and rich forest resources, highlighting the need for increased governmental support in agriculture and forestry. Specific strengths include Kahramanmaraş’s strong agricultural and forestry production, Ordu’s agricultural economy and rural tourism potential, and Burdur’s focus on women’s cooperatives and organic farming.

The LNOB project also captures the resilience and entrepreneurial spirit of rural women from Kahramanmaraş, Ordu and Burdur in Türkiye, and as such has played a pivotal role in uncovering and sharing the inspiring stories of women. The dissemination of these best practices is vital, as they not only inspire other women at risk of being left behind but also contribute to regional dialogue. These examples support the exchange of sustainable approaches in agriculture and forestry, advancing rural women’s entrepreneurship and empowerment in line with the 2030 Agenda.



Empowerment through Gender Units

One of the key aspects of the LNOB project is the establishment of Gender Units within the Provincial Directorates of Agriculture and Forestry in the pilot provinces of Kahramanmaraş, Ordu and Burdur in 2022. These units have been designed to foster gender awareness among staff and provide sustainable connections between rural women and local authorities, who are crucial in addressing the immediate needs of women and reinforcing their empowerment. The Gender Units enhance communication and opportunities through state level collaboration, facilitating new contacts, exploratory discussions and training to ensure quick and effective solutions. Gender Unit staff from three pilot provinces and MoAF representatives from Ankara (20 men and 18 women) participated over two days in the Introductory Training on Gender Analysis and Mainstreaming in Agriculture and Forestry in 2022, along with the capacity development workshop organized in 2023. The training and workshop aimed to deepen their understanding of gender based discrimination and the gender division of labour, supporting the creation of inclusive policies, analysis and programmes to empower rural women in entrepreneurship within agriculture and forestry sectors. Through the efforts of the Gender Units established in the pilot provinces, women have continued to unlock their potential and amplify their impact. This progress is driven by the gender sensitive support, communication and analysis provided by dedicated, experienced staff within these units. By offering training, guidance on grant opportunities, business planning, and access to agricultural inputs and equipment, the gender units directly supported 148 rural women who participated in the training, helping to diversify their incomes throughout the project. Training sessions for the identified value chains included yoghurt-making together with a focus on animal health and drying persimmon in Kahramanmaraş (27–29 November 2023), food safety including fig production in Burdur (18 December 2023), and beekeeping in Ordu (11–12 December 2023, February 2024). The role of the Gender Units is further illustrated in the following best practice examples, which demonstrate how these units have supported women in overcoming challenges and promoting growth.

Three women from each of the pilot provinces were chosen to illustrate best practices for the project: they come from diverse backgrounds and have encountered a wide range of challenges, including harsh living conditions, societal pressures, limited opportunities, economic hardships and unforeseen disasters. Each has demonstrated remarkable resilience with the support of the Gender Units, working in close collaboration with FAO. The situation in Kahramanmaraş is particularly striking. On 6 February 2023, earthquakes struck Türkiye’s “fertile crescent”, a region that contributes 15.3 percent to the nation’s agricultural gross domestic product (GDP)⁴. Many people there still need to rehabilitate barns, rebuild infrastructure, and strengthen rural livelihoods and agrifood systems. In Kahramanmaraş, a young woman has made significant strides in the agricultural sector, overcoming the challenges of a traditionally male dominated field. In Ordu, known for its agricultural gardens of kiwis, strawberries, walnuts, apples, persimmons, and notably hazelnuts, a woman has converted personal hardship into a flourishing vinegar production enterprise using these local products. Her achievements have substantially increased her family’s income and exemplify a model of success for other women. The economy of Burdur province is primarily agricultural and has significant potential for women’s cooperatives. Under the LNOB project, various

cooperatives have been assessed to highlight their capabilities and share knowledge, contributing to the empowerment of women. Among them, the president of a women's entrepreneurship cooperative has navigated challenging times by seeking alternative solutions and fostering a supportive network to ensure the cooperative's continuity. These three women's success stories serve as catalysts for women's empowerment, illustrating the capacity of their achievements.

Zeynep Oğul: A passion for growth



© FAO/Zeynep Oğul

Zeynep Oğul, a 23 year old woman from the small village of Beyoğlu in Kahramanmaraş, lives with her family. Despite graduating from the Paramedical Department, she has spent the last three years working as a farmer, emerging as a symbol of hope and resilience for other rural women in her village seeking to earn a livelihood. Her journey began 4 years ago with her father's encouragement. As the village chief, he supported her attendance at a training programme focused on aromatic plants, organized by FAO. This training ignited her passion for farming and led her to specialize in various crops, including cucumbers, strawberries,

eggplants, tomatoes, peppers, corn, wheat and barley. Starting with just 3.23 hectares (8 acres) of family land, she has expanded her operations to around 40.46 hectares (100 acres) and employs several village women, despite having had limited equipment in the past. With continued support from the Gender Unit in Kahramanmaraş, she was able to diversify her production further, especially after the earthquake, which worsened the already challenging conditions rural women entrepreneurs face in a maledominated agricultural sector

An effort to overcome the earthquakes' devastation

The devastating twin earthquakes in 2023 that struck Kahramanmaraş severely impacted on Zeynep's life and farming operations, exacerbating the existing challenges she already faced. After the earthquake, Zeynep and her family started to live in a container next to their heavily damaged house. Her arable fields were ruptured, with huge cracks and lowered parts of land, making cultivation difficult. As she shares, "We had 12.14 hectares (30 acres) of land, but 4.04 hectares (10 acres) sank by 1 metre, making it hard to plough. The cracks led to the breakout of excess water, causing our crops to rot". In her village, most tractors were buried under rubble, rendering them unusable. Despite these hardships, Zeynep managed to purchase a new tractor last year, though she continues to make instalment payments. Her more stable income, achieved through the enhanced skills and technical support provided by Gender Unit staff, has been key to new investments.

Breaking biases in the village

Even before the earthquakes, Zeynep faced significant challenges, including economic hardships and discrimination from male farmers who initially did not accept her as a farmer and refused to cultivate her lands with their tractors when she could not afford her own. She made enormous efforts to convince the male farmers, who often delayed cultivating her lands, resulting in her crops being among the last to grow in the village while others had already harvested theirs.

She also shares that most male farmers in her village concealed the prices of their products from her when she needed to sell her freshly collected produce quickly to merchants. Zeynep once attempted to establish a cooperative with other farmers in the village to ensure fair pricing for their crops and protect them from market exploitation. However, as the only woman farmer, she struggled to overcome prejudice and convince others to accept her leadership. Despite facing discrimination from male farmers, Zeynep's dedication and passion for farming gradually earned their respect and support. "Men in agriculture initially saw me as their rival because I am a woman. However, once they saw my passion for my work, they began to show their support," she says. Now, Zeynep and other male farmers exchange knowledge and experiences with each other. In this regard, she emphasizes the importance of staying connected with the Kahramanmaraş Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry and the Gender Unit for updates on training opportunities.

Pursuit of knowledge

Her enthusiasm for learning led her to participate in additional training sessions organized by the Kahramanmaraş Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry, covering topics such as hygiene and irrigation. The LNOB project's drying training in Kahramanmaraş in 2023, focusing on persimmon, introduced her to effective techniques for drying fruits and vegetables including apples, plums, grapes, peppers and tomatoes. She learned from her mistake of peeling persimmons before drying, thanks to the training organized in collaboration



with FAO and the Gender Unit in Kahramanmaraş. Now, she uses the techniques more effectively to achieve better results and explains that, “The training inspired me to incorporate drying techniques into my work, particularly influencing my decision to seed date palms and cultivate peppers for drying. This is how I applied the 50 percent grant for date palms from Kahramanmaraş Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry”. Zeynep saw this as a chance to discover her potential and acquire new skills through the training.

Empowering other women

Zeynep's growing curiosity and commitment to learning enhanced her connection with the local authorities and positioned her as a bridge between the Gender Unit at the Kahramanmaraş Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry and the women in her village who needed support for agricultural production. In addition, she became a pioneer in her village, registering as the first woman farmer in Beyoğlu and encouraging other women to join the Farmer Registry System. “I encouraged many women to register with the Farmer Register system, as I became the first registered woman farmer in Beyoğlu,” she recounts. Zeynep also inspired women to participate in various training programmes, including yoghurt-making, organized under the LNOB project in 2023.

“Together we grow stronger”

Zeynep dreams of establishing a larger farm where she can employ more women, utilize advanced drying machines, and create her own brand to sell various products both in Türkiye and abroad, demonstrating that opportunities extend beyond Beyoğlu village. Her entrepreneurial spirit and determination to challenge gender biases in the male dominated agricultural sector serve as an inspiration to other women in her community. She emphasizes that, “My dream is to establish a farm on a larger scale, where women can be employed to harvest and dry our peppers with our own equipment and to build my own brand to sell our products not only in Türkiye but also in other countries”. Despite facing natural disasters, gender discrimination and economic hardships, Zeynep exemplifies the impact of the collaboration between the Kahramanmaraş Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry and FAO, supported by the Gender Unit. This partnership has been crucial in empowering her, helping her to sustain and grow her farming business while diversifying her income. Her journey not

only highlights her resilience but also serves as an inspiration to other women, showcasing the LNOB project's success in creating opportunities and driving communitywide change through effective support and knowledgesharing mechanisms. As a result, she has achieved a more stable income and improved her economic conditions, potentially transforming the lives of other rural women in her village too.

Arzu Gündüz: A journey combining opportunity creation with ambition



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Arzu Gündüz, born in 1972 in Ulubey, Ordu, and a mother of two sons, has navigated significant personal and economic challenges, including the recent loss of her husband. Despite these hardships, she has worked hard to find ways to earn her own income. In the village of Bozbey, Ordu, she has forged a remarkable path for herself while raising her children and singlehandedly managing the family's hazelnut production, which became their primary source of income following her husband's sudden illness. Despite the heavy labour involved in hazelnut production, she successfully managed the production of 15 to 20 tonnes with the assistance of seasonal workers. Arzu's determination has inspired other rural women in her community, many of whom have since obtained their driving licences with her encouragement. "Seasonal workers were often sceptical when they saw me driving a pickup truck", she notes, reflecting on the challenges of breaking gender norms in her role, where she frequently transported workers to their hazelnut fields.

A family's health problems spark a business

The first steps of Arzu's entrepreneurial journey into vinegar production began in 2000, prompted by her youngest child's severe respiratory health issues. To ensure a healthier environment, her family eliminated chemical cleaners and sought natural alternatives. During the 5-year treatment, hygiene and disinfection became crucial, with the family living in a kind of quarantine. Driven by this situation, Arzu's passion led her to experiment with vinegar production. She not only sustained their livelihood through hazelnut farming but also ventured into producing vinegar at home, starting with apples from their garden and eventually creating a unique hazelnut vinegar.

What began as a mission to keep her family members healthy grew into a thriving business, supported by the Ordu Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry and Ordu Metropolitan Municipality in 2019. Arzu joined a market place initiative for local women producers, where she launched her initial product line of just 4 types of vinegar, alongside 30 other women. Today, Arzu proudly produces a variety of vinegars in her certified home kitchen, selling them at the same marketplace where her journey began. Her progress has been consistently supported by the Ordu Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry, with additional backing from the Gender Unit, which specifically addressed her development needs.

Despite the loss of her husband, her primary supporter, and enduring long-term family health issues, she has successfully sustained her livelihood through vinegar production. Her achievements reflect her determination and entrepreneurial spirit, empowered by the collaboration of local authorities and enhanced through a more gender-specific approach developed via the Gender Unit's specialized support within the project framework.

“I created a small life for myself in this big world”

Arzu's dedication to producing a diverse range of vinegars has garnered recognition and support, including visits from FAO and the Ordu Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry in 2023 within the scope of LNOB project to highlight her work as an example of best practice. She has completed hygiene training delivered by the Ordu Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry and she regularly consults with the Gender Unit of the Agriculture and Forestry Directorate, which assists her in navigating the challenges of small business ownership. She acknowledges that “their guidance and suggestions always make it easier for me to find my way and develop my small business”. As she reflects on her journey, Arzu notes, “I created a small life for myself in this big world,” emphasizing the sense of achievement she has gained through continuous support from the Gender Unit in Ordu.



“Learning new knowledge about vinegar keeps me passionate”

Arzu welcomes the project’s support, saying that “the Gender Unit staff in Ordu always hold my hand whenever I feel desperate due to health issues or challenges in improving my business for a stable income”. For her, producing the healthiest products is a personal mission. Each item she creates is made with the same care and attention she would give to her own family, reflecting her dedication to touching people’s lives through her business. With an everexpanding product range – from avocado to pineapple and beyond – Arzu Gündüz has become the world’s first producer of hazelnut vinegar, currently awaiting patent approval, a process she initiated in collaboration with the Gender Unit in Ordu. Her passion for learning and innovation drives her to explore new flavours and techniques. “Learning new knowledge about vinegar keeps me passionate,” she says, highlighting her ongoing quest for improvement. Arzu dreams of establishing a vinegar house to create job opportunities for other women and share her expertise. She envisions building a network of local women producers across Türkiye, fostering a supportive community that celebrates traditional methods and local products.

Arzu Gündüz’s journey exemplifies how personal hardship can be transformed into a thriving business and is a source of inspiration for other women entrepreneurs. Step by step, Arzu has built a new life for herself, turning her challenges into opportunities for growth and success. Out of the 30 women who joined the marketplace initiative for local women producers, only 2, including Arzu, continued operating. She has expanded her product line from just 4 types of vinegar to 60, allowing her to leave hazelnut production behind and generate a stable income solely from traditional products made in her own kitchen, with vinegar production at the forefront. Her resilience and dedication to growth, supported by the LNOB project and the Gender Unit in Ordu, reveal a remarkable power of determination, while also highlighting the importance of enhancing institutional capacity and supporting women’s economic participation.

Kadriye Ayan: Turning struggles into strength



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As a mother of two sons, Kadriye Ayan, 45, is a pioneer for women facing challenges in Burdur, Türkiye. As the president of the Hünerli Eller Women’s Initiative Production and Operation Cooperative, she demonstrates firm determination in overcoming economic hardship, limited opportunities and social barriers. Kadriye’s journey embodies the objectives of the LNOB project, which aims to empower vulnerable women by ensuring the sustainability of their women’s cooperative through dedicated efforts.

A life journey of overcoming economic hardship

Kadriye’s life took a drastic turn when her husband suffered a debilitating work accident, forcing him into early retirement with a modest disability pension. Facing financial pressures and the responsibility of raising two children, Kadriye, a high school graduate, turned to her culinary skills to start a smallscale, homebased cooking business. Despite severe economic constraints and societal prejudices, she remained determined and refused to give up.

“I feel free and powerful because I am economically independent”

From her early days of cooking traditional Turkish dishes at home, Kadriye’s business steadily grew. Her path to success was not without challenges. A brief attempt to run a dumpling restaurant from 2003 to 2006 ended due to financial difficulties, but Kadriye’s passion for food production only deepened. She has continued to generate income by cooking and selling homemade local dishes, such as preserves, noodles, jam and tomato paste, from her kitchen. “I feel free and powerful because I am economically independent,” she states, highlighting

the importance of financial freedom. Starting in 2015, her role as a civil servant with the Burdur Municipality enabled her to share her culinary expertise with 27 women, fostering collaboration and mutual support. This effort eventually led to the formation of a women's cooperative in 2019.

“When we reach out to women, the difference starts there”

Driven by her unyielding spirit, Kadriye took a leading role in the establishment of the Hünnerli Eller Women's Initiative Production and Operation Cooperative, where she now serves as president. She persuaded 7 women from her training sessions to join, and the cooperative has since expanded to 11 members. “When we reach out to women, the difference starts there,” Kadriye says, reflecting her belief in the impact of women's collective efforts.

The Burdur Municipality initially supported the cooperative by providing a rent free production space until last year and arranging transportation to showcase their products at various trade fairs. The cooperative empowers women by providing opportunities to network, gain

visibility, and build selfconfidence through media appearances and travel. It brings women together around a shared goal, uniting them collaboratively to produce homecooked meals, pastries and preserves that capture the spirit of their local cuisine. However, sustaining operations has become challenging due to the difficulty of finding affordable rent and the cost of purchasing ingredients for food production. “We need to keep the cooperative growing, produce together, and ensure we retain our own profit,” Kadriye emphasizes, noting that their profits have often been reinvested into equipment and raw materials. Kadriye

diligently seeks every possible support for the cooperative, including applying for grants to obtain machinery and resources. Her equipment support application was approved by the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Organization, and the cooperative received a vegetable dryer, dough roller and granule filler. These machines are currently in storage until a new, affordable location is found to restart operations.

Family support, especially from her husband, has been crucial for Kadriye, but many cooperative members encounter resistance from their families. Balancing domestic responsibilities with work in cooperative often requires late night flexible working hours and personal sacrifices. She also highlights the importance of legal awareness and operational knowledge among members, which are crucial for the cooperative's success and for maintaining member commitment.

Empowering through knowledge

Her passion for learning is evident through her participation in various training programmes on hygiene and food production, organized by the Burdur Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry. By collaborating with the Gender Unit of Burdur Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry, Kadriye continually improves her skills and stays abreast of the

latest techniques. One of the cooperative's products, Burdur squash helva, which has earned a geographic label, reflects their dedication to preserving traditional cooking methods. Additionally, in 2023, training under the LNOB project on fig drying techniques has provided valuable knowledge and fostered connections with other cooperatives in Burdur. Despite current capacity limitations for fig production within their cooperative, all of the training offers hope for future growth and the diversification of their production.

“We need to reach more women and grow with them”

Kadriye's journey, supported by the LNOB project in close collaboration with the Gender Unit in Burdur, showcases the transformative effect of empowerment. Her steadfast determination inspires other women to overcome adversity and make a meaningful impact. Kadriye's vision is to expand the cooperative to reach more women and ensure economic independence for all its members. Through her leadership, the cooperative has the capacity to sustain traditional food production while empowering women and boosting their confidence. “We need to reach more women and grow together with them,” Kadriye emphasizes, reflecting her commitment to inclusivity and community development.

The paths taken by these three women represent vibrant and diverse examples of success, showcasing how state agencies and Gender Units can profoundly impact on women's lives. Their journeys highlight the significant role of enhanced state support in developing rural women's capacities in agricultural entrepreneurship and business development. By improving access to markets, knowledge and skills, these women have not only transformed their own lives but have also created job opportunities for others. Supported by the LNOB project, they have benefited from strengthened institutional mechanisms and capacities, which have enabled Gender Units to formulate and implement gender responsive programmes. This support has been crucial in addressing genderbased inequalities and promoting women's economic empowerment. By disseminating best practices and lessons learned, the project aims to share valuable insights with a broad audience to foster a multiplier effect and address the needs of rural women at risk of being left behind.

Notes

1 FAO. 2011. *The state of food and agriculture: women in agriculture closing the gender gap for development*. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/4/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>

2 FAO. 2023. *Guidelines on integrating the “leave no one behind” principle into development planning in Europe and Central Asia*. Budapest. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/766e9b6c-1955-4503-84cb-9909aa65239e/content>

3 TOBB, TSKB and TEPAV. 2020. *Gender equality scorecard of Turkey's 81 provinces*. Ankara. https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/mce/2020/haberler/tobb_tskb_tepav_gender_equality_scorecard_of_turkeys_81_provinces.pdf

4 FAO. 2023. *Türkiye: Agricultural sector needs assessment for earthquake-impacted provinces*. Ankara. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc6884en>

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