



**WORLD FARMERS'  
ORGANISATION**

ADOPTED BY WFO GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
JUNE 9, 2022

**FOSTERING WOMEN  
EMPOWERMENT  
AS THE ROAD TO  
SUSTAINABILITY**

## Executive Summary

### Guiding Principles

- **Women engagement in decision-making processes:** Fostering inclusive governance at all levels, strengthening women's engagement and participation, is key to ensure them the opportunity to represent and advocate for their specific needs and interests.
- **The multiple roles played by women farmers:** Women are the backbone of rural communities, playing multiple roles both at family and community level. Reducing inequalities and empowering rural women will not only improve nutrition, health and education outcomes, but will also translate into short and long-term economic and social benefits for families, communities and Countries.
- **The need for women-centric response to global challenges:** Investing in rural women and girl's empowerment, providing targeted services and programs, can be a catalyst to accelerate progress in agriculture, rural development, food security and nutrition, while at the same time increasing women's and their communities' resilience to risks, including climate shocks.

### Policy recommendations to foster Women's participation and leadership

- Governments, as well as other stakeholders, should **provide an enabling environment to foster women empowerment**, increasing women's leadership and entrepreneurial skills. This would contribute to the overall sustainable development within food systems.
- Governments should design and implement **policies and targeted programs that contribute to strengthening women's roles and impact by encouraging respectful norms and non-discriminatory behaviors**, by facilitating i.e. equal access to services, resources, market, education, capacity building, social protection schemes, business insurance schemes, child care facilities, thus protecting women's rights and opportunities.
- **The multiple roles played by women, both at family as well as community level, should be recognized**, as well as the unpaid work they do both at household level and in family farms, which would bring economic value to their jobs. Organisations, including farmer organizations and cooperatives could play a key role in this, taking the lead and putting in place the conditions to guarantee equality in salaries and working opportunities.

## Preamble

**Women are the backbone of rural economies and make essential contributions to the agricultural sector and rural communities in both developed and developing Countries.**

Although their role varies greatly across different regions and is evolving in many parts of the world, following the transformations of the agricultural sector and food systems, **it is undeniable that rural women play multiple roles, often managing complex households and pursuing multiple livelihood goals.**

According to FAO<sup>1</sup>, **women represent more than 37 % of the world's rural agricultural workforce. They represent approximately the 50 % of the world's 600 million small-scale livestock keepers and 50 % of the labour force in small-scale fisheries.** Also, it is worth considering that these data, unfortunately, do not entirely reflect the reality as women's work in the agricultural sector often remains hidden and unpaid, thus not appearing in official research and statistics.

The activities women carry out include, among others, producing agricultural crops, harvesting, keeping livestock, processing and preparing food, collecting water, engaging in trade and marketing, taking care of family members and managing homes.

Therefore, the multifunctional role that agriculture plays, being a sector where production is combined with several activities (including for example agrotourism, farm education, care farming among others) that connect farming to society, is perfectly reflected in women's contribution within the farming sector.

**Women and through them, families, play a key role in food systems. However, the transformation of food systems that global society is seeking can only be achieved by prioritizing sustainability and resilience of the entire food value chain, adopting systemic, inclusive and cross-sectoral approaches that ensure equal opportunities for all.**

Special attention should be dedicated to overcoming the persistent inequalities between men and women that undermine women's, and women farmers', potential and increase their vulnerability to the economic, environmental and social challenges the agricultural sector is facing today.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fao.org/3/cb1583en/cb1583en.pdf>

According to FAO the following women-centric constraints seem to be common in agri-food value chains:

- **Unequal access to information, knowledge, and training.**
- **Unequal access to financial services.**
- **Unequal access to inputs and technologies.**
- **Unequal participation, leadership, and decision-making.**
- **Heavy work burdens and time poverty.**
- **Lack of political recognition of the work rural women farmers and girls are doing.**

In fact, it is recognised **that if women farmers had the same access to opportunities and resources as men, the number of hungry people in the world could be reduced by up to 150 million**<sup>2</sup>. However, in the agricultural sector in many Countries, women still face barriers in accessing resources, land, infrastructures, finance, education, extension services, inputs, technology, investments among others, while at the same time they are also care givers of their families, thus contributing to the community livelihoods. Equally important is women's ability to make autonomous choices to achieve desired outcomes, as well as women's engagement in decision-making processes at all levels.

**Discriminatory social norms and rigid roles of women and girls are behind many of these constraints.** Women-headed households need special attention as in many Countries they have a high risk of falling into poverty. As women often have bigger responsibility for household work, this leaves female household heads no time for training, or to actively participate in the activities of farming organizations and cooperatives. Access to childcare facilities is crucial for improve women's possibilities to participate to decision making and training. Also, personal social security rights for women are crucial. Most of the unpaid work globally is carried by women: recognizing the unpaid work in households and family farms would bring economic value to their work and make their input visible.

Globally, women earn approximately 37 % less wage than men<sup>3</sup> in the same position. This wage gap persists in all Countries and across all sectors. **Farmer organizations and cooperatives could play a key role in this, taking the lead and putting in place the conditions to guarantee equality in salaries and working opportunities.**

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<sup>2</sup> [https://bit.ly/WFP\\_Empowering\\_Woman\\_Girls\\_Food\\_Security](https://bit.ly/WFP_Empowering_Woman_Girls_Food_Security)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)

Other issues that hinder women's empowerment are violence and sexual harassment, which both constitute a deep barrier to equality and empowerment, with severe impacts on women's and girls' wellbeing, self-confidence, physical and mental health, and their performance at families and work level. In fact, **violence against women is performed at different levels, including sexual, physical, emotional, but also economic and social, and it is often linked to cultural constraints, social norms, unbalanced relationships with men.** Violence is a major problem for all women, across Countries, with particular emphasis for women and girls in remote and poor rural areas. **Precondition to achieve women empowerment is to respect fundamental human rights and we, farmers, are committed to prevent gender-based violence and harassment.**

### Guiding Principles

We, farmers, strongly believe in the multidimensional nature of agriculture as a key sector to achieve sustainable development. In fact, farming is crucial not only in the fight against food insecurity and climate change, but also as a vehicle for social and economic development, at the level of rural communities with consequent positive impacts on urban areas.

#### *Women engagement in decision-making processes*

**Achieving sustainable development and making food systems fairer and more resilient, require the empowerment and engagement of women and girls as a precondition for the sustainable development of rural communities.** Fostering inclusive governance of local, national and global institutions, **strengthening women's engagement and participation, is key to ensure them the opportunity to represent and advocate for their specific needs and interests.** The combination of interconnected actions at local, national, regional, and global levels is required to increase their capacity, leaderships and entrepreneurial skills, as well as their involvement in the establishment of enabling and inclusive policy frameworks and programmes. **Women convey an innovative and creative vision that considers the protection of non-renewable resources a real progress in terms of sustainability and 'cultural' innovation, the result of their entrepreneurial creativity, the best way to stay open to the future.** For this reason, among others, **women farmers have a key role to play as leaders in the fight against climate change.** Also, it has to be recognised that where leadership roles are given to women farmers **they convey a collaborative vision between different models of agriculture** - from industrialized to niche, from that engaged in organic farming to that of dedicated to internationalization – which is useful for satisfying the needs of society in a more complete way.

### *The multiple roles played by women farmers*

**Empowering women in agriculture**, providing them with the same opportunities as men to participate more effectively in the **sector also leads to an increase in the well-being of their children, which is an investment in human capital for future generations and the sustainability and resilience of the farming sector**. Therefore, reducing inequalities and empowering rural women and girls will not only improve nutrition, health and education outcomes, but will also translate into short and long-term economic and social benefits for families, communities and Countries. As highlighted by the third pillar of the **Global Action Plan of UNDF 2019-2028** “Promote gender equity in family farming and the leadership role of rural women”<sup>4</sup> women play an important role in family farming communities, in the production phase, complementary services (for ex. agrotourism) but also in household work, child-care, nutrition and food security, which are usually left out of the analysis regardless their relevance for families and communities’ livelihoods. Therefore, **to fully achieve SDG5, equality in decision making and management at the household level has also to be achieved, taking also into account resources allocation at family level**.

### *The need for women-centric response to global challenges*

Women play a crucial role being by nature resilient, capable of taking care, creators and curators of bonds and connections both at family level and at the community level. **And this is what women farmers all over the world do: they take care of the land, local traditions, biodiversity, their families and communities, with enormous responsibilities that unfortunately, especially in some areas of the world, still struggle to be recognised and indeed facing immense difficulties in terms of access to resources, especially land**. However, **women are more vulnerable than men to the impacts of global challenges including conflicts, climate change, food insecurity as they represent the majority of world’s poor** and usually rely more on scarce and threatened natural resources. **Investing in rural women and girl’s empowerment can be a catalyst to accelerate progress in agriculture, rural development, food security and nutrition, while at the same time increasing women’s and their communities’ resilience to risks, including climate shocks**. The multiple responsibilities that women have at families’ and communities’ level must be considered when providing services, to allow women’s participation and overcome barriers linked to their limited access to and control of environmental goods and services as well as to education, training, finance, and climate information services to strengthen their management skills if climate risks. High level education, mentoring and network (cooperation) possibilities are crucial to increase women’s overall involvement in agrobusiness.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fao.org/family-farming-decade/pillars/en/#3>

## Main pillars for women's empowerment

- **Equality and/or equity in the access to resources.** Women's and girl's access to resources has to be ensured to empower them and, in the case of rural women, foster the shift from subsistence activities to market-oriented production;
- **Provision of capacity building for women to increase their leadership skills** and make sure they are considered as leaders and equal partners in decision making processes;
- **Creation of political inclusiveness, stability as well as equal rights, opportunities and a safe environment as preconditions for women and men's equal engagement,** and thus for increasing women's involvement in the decision-making process.

## Policy recommendations to foster Women's participation and leadership

### 1. Advocate for the crucial role of women in the food systems

**Without equal rights between men and women, sustainable food systems will not be achieved as resources will not be used efficiently and sustainably.** Policy support is needed to empower women, increase their leadership capacity and decision-making power within public and private institutions at all levels and increase their involvement in design and implementation of policies and programmes. This will contribute to increase women's self-esteem and opportunities to speak up and represent their interests, thus contributing to improve their position within families, communities and organisations.

### 2. Eliminate rigid stereotypes, restrictive norms and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors against women and girls

**Inclusive and respectful norms and behaviors should be encouraged, and it is key to make sure men are engaged in the process of recognizing women's roles and specificities as well as educated on equality between women and men, and women empowerment issues.** Equality between men and women will only be achieved **with the support of men and boys** and by limiting the discriminatory traditions and social norms that threaten women reducing their opportunities, freedom, self-confidence. **There is an increasing need to provide women with leaderships and entrepreneurial skills to gain their space in organisations and institutions, from local to global levels.**

### 3. Advocate for the adoption of policies for women's empowerment and women's rights

**Governments should adopt and implement enabling policies that contribute to achieving women empowerment and protect women's rights and opportunities by facilitating equal access to services** (including extension services, healthcare, microcredit), **resources** (including land, technology, inputs), **market, education.**

### 4. Invest in education and training

**Governments, as well as private and public institutions, should create a conducive environment based on targeted policies and programmes to support women and avoid barriers that prevent their access to education.** Indeed, education is crucial to empower women and girls with knowledge, skills, and self-confidence necessary to fully unlock their potential as entrepreneurs and innovators. **Moreover, women's education and capacity building have a tremendous impact not only on their own development but also on their families and communities.**

### 5. Provide organizational frameworks that empower women farmers

Providing women and men with the same opportunities is a key driver of sustainable development. Governments, as well as other public and private institutions, should support women in the creation of marketing groups and cooperatives. **Agricultural cooperatives empower rural women by increasing their independence, both at psychological and financial level, and power in negotiating prices and contract terms, as well as in the decision-making processes of their organizations and communities.** Capacity building trainings to build leadership skills are also key to women empowerment and emancipation.

### 6. Recognise the importance of household responsibilities

Recognise and analyze how household responsibilities affect women's and men's time and capacity to engage in productive work in family farms and in the value chain. Indeed, **one of the main barriers women face in rural areas is time poverty, which is the ability of people to engage in other productive activities (for example education) that is constrained due to the time spent on subsistence activities, which weigh almost exclusively on women.** On the other hand, adjust services to women so that their other responsibilities do not hinder their possibilities to have access to them.



## 7. Ensure Social Protection Schemes

Governments should invest in the implementation of social protection policies and programmes (including social assistance, social insurances) to support people and especially the most vulnerable groups, including women, against poverty and social exclusion. These measures, especially in developing Countries, are an asset especially to women and girls as can reduce inequalities and help women access to resources and services. **Social protection policies that recognise women's roles and alleviate their burdens lead to increasing resilience, reducing inequalities, poverty, food insecurity, thus enhancing sustainable development of rural areas.**

## 8. Enhance equal access to productive resources and assets

**Analyse the consequences of unequal practices in value chains and understand that this is required as a one step towards sustainable food systems to overcome barriers including food losses, low productivity, missed business opportunities, lack of technology utilization and limited production growth.** Governments, as well as other private and public institutions, should also facilitate women's access to loans and business insurance schemes to encourage women's entrepreneurial skills

## 9. Provide women with equal career and decision-making opportunities

**Governments, organisations, institutions, should make sure that equal career opportunities are offered to women and men as well as equal wage.** Also, women and men should have the same opportunities in accessing managerial and governance positions to fully express their decision-making power.

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