Gender responsive actions are underway in the first half of 2024

In this issue, we feature Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) latest initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in rural advisory services, agriculture and rural development in Europe and Central Asia. This edition highlights the pivotal findings of FAO’s new report on women-responsive rural advisory services, critical updates on the revised Country Gender Assessment for Tajikistan, the story of a leading woman beekeeper from Uzbekistan, and the progress on climate resilient economic empowerment for women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We invite you to join us in exploring the transformative practices and policies that can empower rural women and advance sustainable agriculture globally.

In this issue:

Regional highlights:

• FAO’s new report on women responsive rural advisory services
• International Women’s Day: celebrating inspiring women’s stories

Voices from the field:

• Validating the Country Gender Assessment findings in Tajikistan
• Breaking barriers and buzzing forwards: Zarnigor’s inspiring journey in Uzbekistan
• Supporting climate resilient economic empowerment for women in Bosnia and Herzegovina

FAO’s new report on women responsive rural advisory services

“Globally, 5 percent of RAS resources target women while, in the ECA region, an estimated 10 percent of RAS users are women,” says FAO’s new report titled “Ensuring that rural advisory services are responsive to women: good practices from FAO experiences in Europe and Central Asia”. This comprehensive study highlights the pivotal role of gender-responsive rural advisory services (RAS) in promoting agricultural innovation and gender equality.

1 The report is available at https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/5ff3b474-d507-4bf3-ae1f-774f66476a95/content
The report underscores the significance of RAS in empowering women in agrifood systems by providing them with the necessary knowledge, information and skills to enhance their productivity and livelihoods. It moves beyond traditional extension services to embrace a holistic approach that includes the diverse needs and roles of women in agriculture.

The report answers three key questions:

1. Why are gender-responsive RAS necessary?

2. What are the current status and promising practices of gender-responsive RAS in the region?

3. What are the main strategies to ensure that RAS are responsive to the needs of women?

The report offers clear answers to these questions. Evidence shows that gender-responsive RAS are essential for realizing international commitments on gender equality, addressing and closing gender gaps in agrifood systems, and ensuring inclusivity in agricultural knowledge and resource access. Gender-responsive RAS lead to increased productivity, stable incomes, and food security for women, helping to close other gender gaps. Conversely, gender-blind RAS worsen existing inequalities, limiting women’s potential and leading to lower yields and higher risks of poverty and food insecurity.

The report illustrates key factors that impact on the provision of gender-responsive RAS:

- **Organizational culture**: Many RAS are not designed with a gender perspective, often resulting in services that are gender-blind and that fail to address the specific needs of women.

- **Time burdens**: Women often have greater domestic and care responsibilities, limiting their availability to attend RAS sessions.

- **Social norms**: These may prevent women from participating in mixed-sex meetings or travelling to attend training sessions led by men.

- **Resource access**: Women generally have less access to land, credit and other agricultural inputs, which are prerequisites for benefiting from RAS.

- **Recognition**: Women’s roles in agriculture are often unrecognized, and they are less likely to be seen as primary farmers, which can exclude them from RAS programmes aimed at farm owners or managers.

Yet, there are many promising practices that deliver an optimistic outlook for the region. The report cites FAO initiatives that encourage women’s access to RAS and help improve the gender-responsiveness of RAS systems and service providers. Some RAS programmes are starting to integrate gender sensitive approaches, such as offering child care, transportation and women-only training groups. To improve women’s eligibility for RAS, efforts to strengthen women’s land rights and their representation in agricultural organizations are being undertaken. Programmes are also increasingly combining technical skills and knowledge transfer with soft skills like communication, negotiation and leadership training for women’s better use of RAS.

The report identifies some important strategies for RAS transformation, including understanding women farmers’ needs through collecting sex-disaggregated data, embracing gender transformative approaches, shifting to inclusive service delivery modalities, and brokering partnerships with women’s initiatives.

The report envisages that RAS not only improve women’s access to agricultural resources but also challenge and transform the underlying gender inequalities. By showcasing effective practices and providing actionable recommendations, the report aims to guide policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders in creating inclusive and equitable agricultural systems.

Validating the Country Gender Assessment findings in Tajikistan

FAO’s efforts to identify the challenges and opportunities for women’s empowerment and resilience in rural contexts are progressing at full capacity in the region. On 30 April 2024, FAO conducted a Country Gender Assessment (CGA) validation workshop in Tajikistan with the participation of government partners and gender experts to discuss the key findings of the assessment which was conducted under the FAO–Türkiye Partnership Programme on Food and Agriculture.2 Workshop representatives from

2 The earlier version of the CGA is available at https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/ac04d416-f189-4171-bf18-1dfb847024f6/content
governmental bodies, non governmental organizations, academia and the private sector discussed and refined the assessment’s outcomes.

In his opening speech, Oleg Guchgeldiev, FAO Representative in Tajikistan, talked about the significant role that women play in food production, which is also documented in FAO’s global report 3 on the status of women in agrifood systems. The global report provides extensive and up to date data and information on this topic.

Dono Abdurazakova, Senior Gender and Social Protection Adviser at the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, emphasized the need for periodic updates of the CGA every 5 to 6 years due to evolving gender dynamics. To this end, the revised CGA for Tajikistan incorporates new literature reviews and data from interviews with rural women and key informants, revealing common challenges such as male outmigration, which increases women’s responsibilities without granting them additional resources or decision making power. Women face a heavy workload, balancing agricultural duties with household chores, child care, and care of older family members.

Despite some positive developments, like improved digital knowledge, significant issues persist, including restricted access to finance, agricultural inputs and extension services. Structural barriers also limit women’s land and business ownership, and gender-based violence remains widespread, exacerbated by legal illiteracy.

The CGA’s recommendations focus on three areas: supporting agricultural and rural development infrastructure, integrating gender considerations across sectors, and investing in women as change agents. Effective monitoring of these actions is crucial to ensure progress. Dono Abdurazakova concluded that empowering rural women and removing barriers will enhance agricultural sustainability and rural development, necessitating gender sensitive policies and practices.

Participants discussed various aspects of the CGA report, highlighting its critical evaluation of gender issues in Tajikistan. It was noted that although women and girls legally have equal access to education, efforts are needed to enhance enrolment. The Ministry of Economic Development and Trade is incorporating gender aspects into its regional development strategies, and the Ministry of Agriculture has emphasized the need to improve digital education for women.

The Ministry of Education and Science pointed out the decline in higher education enrolment among girls from remote areas, despite the existing quotas. The Ministry of Health has implemented strategies to enhance health care access, including reproductive health services, while the Ministry of Labor is focusing on employment programmes to support women and vulnerable populations. Experts stressed the need for more specific data on rural women, also noting that the high birth rate strains existing infrastructure. There was a call for more women in rural extension services and the importance of recognizing women’s roles in agriculture, despite systemic barriers such as inheritance practices. Additionally, integrating gender perspectives into fiscal policies and tracking the implementation of past recommendations were suggested as future improvements.

Participants all agreed on the necessity of activating legal opportunities, increasing legal literacy, and ensuring continuous capacity building for gender units across ministries to address the ongoing gender disparities effectively.

One significant outcome from the workshop was the validation and endorsement of the CGA findings by

---

3 The report is available at https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc5343en
the participating stakeholders. The discussions led to the formulation of actionable recommendations aimed at bridging gender gaps in agriculture. These recommendations emphasize the need for gender-sensitive policy frameworks, capacity building initiatives for women farmers, and the establishment of monitoring mechanisms to track progress. Additionally, the workshop underscored the importance of fostering partnerships among different stakeholders to create a supportive ecosystem for gender responsive agricultural development.

The revised CGA for Tajikistan will be published in 2024, serving as a valuable resource for policymakers, practitioners and researchers dedicated to promoting gender equality in agriculture in the country.

**Breaking barriers and buzzing forwards: Zarnigor’s inspiring journey in Uzbekistan**

Zarnigor, a 29-year-old single mother, resides in the Boʻstonliq district of the Tashkent region in Uzbekistan. Her story is a testament to the enduring legacy of beekeeping in her family, a profession passed down from her great grandfather to her father, and now to her.

Zarnigor’s fascination with beekeeping began in her childhood. Growing up in a family deeply rooted in the beekeeping tradition, she learned the intricacies of the craft from a young age. Her great-grandfather was a dedicated beekeeper, and her father has devoted over 20 years to the practice. By the age of ten, she was already aware of the hard work and perseverance required to produce honey.

Today, Zarnigor and her father manage over 100 beehives. Their commitment to quality and sustainability has earned them a loyal customer base, many of whom purchase their honey for its medicinal properties.

In June 2024, Zarnigor attended FAO’s training session, led by Sherzod Suyarkulov, a beekeeping expert, which allowed her to gain access to technical resources and adopt best practices in beekeeping. As a result, her honey yields have increased, and the health of her bee colonies has improved.

Zarnigor’s story is not just about beekeeping; it’s also about breaking stereotypes in this traditionally male-dominated field. She emphasizes that women possess the innate skills and instincts needed for beekeeping. Women in this field can expertly care for bees, identify diseases, package products beautifully, and interact with customers effectively.

Despite the challenges of being a single mother, Zarnigor is a role model for her son. She instils in him the values of hard work and environmental stewardship. Together, they have made it a tradition to plant fruit tree seedlings on every birthday, contributing to the greening of their garden and reinforcing the importance of sustainability.
determination and support, women can find their place in society and make significant contributions, whether in rural areas or urban centres.

Zarnigor takes immense pride in her work, knowing that bees are vital to life on earth. Her contribution to producing honey, a natural source of sweetness and healing, is a source of great satisfaction. Her story is a powerful reminder of the impact that one dedicated individual can have on their community and beyond.

Many rural women farmers like Zarnigor are benefitting from the capacity building activities conducted through FAO-Türkiye Partnership Programme. The “Leaving No One Behind: Greater Involvement and Empowerment of Rural Women in Türkiye and Central Asia” project aims to improve the economic status of rural women by strengthening national capacities to formulate and implement socially inclusive agricultural and forestry policies and programmes in Türkiye, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Supporting climate resilient economic empowerment for women in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina’s efforts to achieve and exceed pre-war agricultural production levels have been hampered by a lack of inclusive and targeted actions and addressing the impacts of climate change on the most vulnerable populations. Funded by the Government of Sweden, a joint UN Women and FAO project – “Women Driving Resilience in Agriculture and Rural Development” – aims to address structural barriers and enable women to better prepare for coping with challenges, thereby improving their livelihoods and socioeconomic position and the lives of their families in rural areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The assessment has identified several key challenges in the country:

- There are significant gaps in achieving gender equality and empowering women in agriculture and climate action policies.
- Despite legal provisions, rural women face unequal access to support programmes, technologies and market opportunities.
- There is a disconnect between climate action initiatives and gender-responsive policymaking, particularly in agriculture. This is exacerbated by the lack of sex-disaggregated data.
- Public advisory services are overstretched and they need enhanced capacity to apply gender-focused strategies effectively. Rural women’s representation in planning and programming agrarian policies is minimal.
- Young, educated women interested in agriculture and entrepreneurship lack opportunities, exacerbated by demographic challenges and unbalanced territorial development.
- Climate change impacts on agriculture further threaten the economic wellbeing of rural households, disproportionately affecting women.

The assessment highlights that effective integration of gender equality into climate strategies is essential to mitigate socioeconomic disadvantages. Further, increased investment in rural development and market infrastructure remains crucial. Currently, only 14.4 percent of the budget is allocated to this sector, limiting the scope of rural women’s production activities.

To generate local actionable points, FAO conducted two capacity-building workshops on gender mainstreaming in climate-resilient agriculture and rural development in Pale

4 The report is available at https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/83f04589-10da-496f-b553-84f982b5fcd1/content
in Republika Srpska and Zenica in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 20 May and 21 May, respectively. Out of the 31 participants, more than 50 percent represented local municipalities, with the remaining participants being representatives of agricultural and women’s associations, agricultural extension services and local business initiatives. Overall, more than half of the participants (54 percent) had not received any prior training or orientation on gender equality and social inclusion before attending the training workshops.

There was strong agreement among participants that local community members and decision-makers have a better understanding of the situation on the ground and the necessary human resources for actioning initiatives. For these reasons, follow-up capacity building on empowering women in rural areas is essential. Participants in both Pale and Zenica emphasized that despite having laws, their inconsistent enforcement leads to widespread apathy and lack of motivation among residents, particularly women. Additionally, villages and rural areas are declining because of a lack of essential facilities like schools and infrastructure, making it hard for young women and men to stay and start families. As one of the participants summarized, “real change requires not just written plans but practical examples and commitment to implementation, [taking into account] broader needs rather than focusing on only economic indicators”. At the same time, others emphasized the need to provide integrated support to women business owners, including training and in-kind/monetary support.

During both workshops, there was a strong consensus that more awareness raising is needed at all levels of government to make rural women visible in national and regional programmes. Summarizing the policy implications, one participant in Pale reflected, “it is important to strengthen women’s associations and encourage collective action because these give women more chances [to] benefit from incentives from donors, local communities and relevant ministries”. The participants also prioritized the implementation of financial support for startup initiatives and robust support for involving women in production and marketing of agricultural products, as well as the need to address climate change issues from the perspective of rural women.

As a next step, nine farmer field schools will be set up to help women improve their farming skills and income through modern, digital and climate-smart agricultural practices. The schools will focus on areas where women can benefit the most. Additionally, women producers will be encouraged to form networks such as associations or cooperatives, based on their needs and market opportunities. These networks will help women share information, work together, and access education and training more easily. By collaborating, women can better access markets and increase their bargaining power, which is especially important for small-scale producers.

Acknowledgements

The gender team at FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia would like to thank the following colleagues for their contributions and support in preparing this issue of the newsletter:

Viktorya Ayvazyan, FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia
Malika Maxmudova, FAO in Uzbekistan
Mavzuna Yaminova, FAO in Tajikistan

Special thanks are extended to the many women and men who shared their stories with us.