Advancing the gender equality agenda at the ECA 42

FAO convenes the European Commission on Agriculture every two years to assist the region’s Members in cooperating on tackling agricultural challenges and to make relevant recommendations within its geographical and technical competence. This year, on 19–21 January, the Forty-Second Session of the European Commission of Agriculture (ECA 42) focused on transforming food systems to address all forms of malnutrition in Europe and Central Asia and aimed to identify actions that help provide healthy and nutritious diets for all.

At the ECA 42, the Commission made recommendations aimed at transforming food systems in Europe and Central Asia for improved nutritional outcomes, better production to increase access to diverse, nutritious foods, and territorial approaches and community development to drive local change. Advancing gender equality is a standing theme for all sessions at the ECA. To promote gender mainstreaming and leaving no one behind, FAO presented the findings of the background paper,1 introducing and updating the progress made in the region and in advancing gender equality.

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Regional highlights:
- 42nd session of the European Commission on Agriculture and the gender equality agenda
- The “Leaving no one behind” initiative in Turkey and Central Asia

In-depth case studies:
- A new joint initiative by FAO, UNDP, UNFPA, and Liberty Bank in Georgia
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The background paper reiterates that the Regional Gender Equality Strategy for 2019–2022 and its action plan continue to be relevant in view of the newly updated FAO Policy on Gender Equality (2020–2030), along with its goals and objectives. In this context, the paper outlines FAO’s contribution to the gender mainstreaming efforts in the region. FAO in Europe and Central Asia continue to assist Member States through gender expertise at the regional and national levels to support policies which contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and inclusive and sustainable food systems that leave no one behind. To this end, FAO has built knowledge, raised awareness, and shared experiences on gender equality and women’s empowerment among 17 countries in the region. In the last two years, FAO’s efforts in this area include the following key resources:

- Country Gender Assessments (CGAs) featuring qualitative and quantitative data reviews of key gender issues in agriculture and rural development. These assessments have shed light on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural communities, and in particular women, to contribute to policy dialogue in the face of new and emerging challenges;

- Regional knowledge products on gender and the socioeconomic dimensions of pesticide use;

- A regional report on the status of social protection for rural populations in Europe and Central Asia;

- A guidebook on gender and climate finance investments in agriculture based on FAO’s experiences with Global Environment Facility (GEF) and Green Climate Fund (GCF) projects in Europe and Central Asia; and

- An overview of rural advisory services in the region from a gender perspective.

At the national level, over the last two years, FAO has been providing technical assistance to the ministries of agriculture in Azerbaijan, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia and Uzbekistan in order to enhance capacities to formulate and implement evidence-based policies in agrifood systems that are responsive to the needs of rural women and disadvantaged groups in agriculture, forestry and fishery. With FAO support, the State Committee of Forestry in Uzbekistan adopted its first sectoral gender strategy which, among other issues, designates gender coordinators in the provinces and aims to support rural women in forest-dependent communities.

To facilitate regional dialogue, FAO collaborated with the Moscow National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in organizing the International Forum “Food policy, rural development and gender equality in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia: Current trends and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic” in March 2021. The Forum convened policymakers, CSOs, academics and farmers to discuss agrifood system policies vis-a-vis gender inequalities. Furthermore, FAO, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the International Union of Notaries (UINL) collaborated with national authorities in the Western Balkans to assist with the reporting on gender equality in land ownership and control (SDG 5.a.2).

In the field, a women’s economic empowerment project is underway in Azerbaijan and within the framework of the FAO–Turkey Partnership Programme, FAO started a new project in October 2021 that targets the policy and grassroots levels in Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan for socially inclusive agrifood systems that leave no one behind.

Despite stakeholder efforts, there are persistent gender gaps which require action from Member States in order to improve rural women’s access to land tenure, farm ownership and management, to tackle informal employment in agriculture, to enhance access to agricultural services, inputs and resources, and to instigate gender-transformative agricultural policies that address the root causes of inequality. Consequently, the ECA 42 background paper recommends that policymakers strengthen the evidence base and gender statistics, and review gender gaps in access to inputs; equip rural women with diverse and viable opportunities to reduce the gender pay gap and women’s unpaid workload; empower rural women as leaders in their households, as farmers and as stakeholders in rural development and in governance at all levels; invest in physical and social infrastructure; and recognize women’s role in unpaid domestic and care work. The background paper also underscores the need for gender mainstreaming initiatives to go beyond improving rural women’s access to sustainable livelihoods by highlighting and challenging the very norms that perpetuate these inequalities.

Following a discussion of the background paper, the Commission recommended that Member States and FAO pursue a gender-transformative approach, strengthen the evidence base and collection of gender statistics relevant to agriculture, continue implementing targeted programmes that empower rural women, and create an enabling policy environment. The Commission also recommended that stakeholders implement social protection policies that recognize women’s unpaid labour and continue the advocacy and development initiatives that tackle critical gender gaps.

**FAO launches a new rural women’s empowerment initiative in Turkey and Central Asia**

The “Leaving no one behind: greater involvement and empowerment of rural women in Turkey and Central Asia” (GCF/SEC/018/TUR) initiative has recently been launched to support women at policy and grassroots levels over the coming three years.

Initially targeting Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan in its scope, the initiative will then invite other countries in Europe

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and Central Asia to join regional events to exchange best practice.

The initiative recognizes rural women as important contributors to agriculture, food production and community development, in addition to acknowledging their roles in caring for their families and households, looking after kitchen gardens and small livestock, and preparing agricultural products for home consumption or for sale. Moreover, when rural women engage in fuel and water supply, their daily workloads increase further. It is these care responsibilities, together with the work performed by women, which often go unrecognized and uncompensated.

To enhance recognition and improve women’s economic status, the initiative proposes removing the barriers that women face in accessing resources and opportunities. These include ensuring equal access to property and land, creating decent employment opportunities, enabling access to technologies, credit and information, and building skills. As FAO’s evidence base demonstrates, these gender-based inequalities are, to a significant extent, responsible for the underperformance of the agriculture sector as a whole.

To respond to these challenges, the initiative promotes knowledge and skills to improve rural women’s economic status and to start businesses and cooperatives as a means of developing women’s agency in their communities. FAO will conduct awareness-raising campaigns that highlight rural women’s contribution to communities through success stories, providing inspiration to rural women across the region.

The fieldwork will assist policymakers and practitioners in formulating evidence-based, socially inclusive and gender-responsive policies in agriculture and food security and will support institutional frameworks to translate policies into action on the ground. The initiative’s proposed regional platform will enable the ministries of agriculture in Turkey, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to share challenges, best practice and policy solutions in implementing gender-responsive agriculture and rural development policies and programmes.

FAO Georgia: “Partnership to increase men’s engagement in ensuring women’s economic empowerment and gender equality”

“I am really pleased that, as part of the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence, UN agencies have joined forces and, in partnership with the private sector, have planned awareness-raising meetings. These meetings aim to increase men’s engagement for women’s economic empowerment and gender equality,” says Iamze Mirazanashvili, Gender Focal Point at FAO Georgia, who welcomes the new joint initiative between FAO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Liberty Bank. The partnership seeks to raise the awareness of both men and women in relation to gender equality, reproductive health and rights, community participation, women’s economic empowerment, and banking services for rural women, and meetings are already underway in the regions of Georgia.

Awareness-raising events for women have been conducted in Shida Kartli and Racha-Lechkhumi in Georgia. Women who were also involved in another FAO Agriculture and Rural Development Project, sponsored by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC), attended the meetings, and received information on a range of topics, including family planning, prevention of uterine and breast cancer, domestic violence, harmful practices (early marriage, gender selection), the role of gender equality in the development of business and agriculture, financial planning and banking services offered to women in agriculture.

According to Mariam Bandzeladze, Gender Analyst at UNFPA Georgia, “achieving gender equality remains a significant challenge for Georgia, so the joint effort of UN agencies to reach as many women and men as possible across the country is crucial. Ensuring women’s reproductive health and rights, empowering women and adolescent girls, as well as increasing men’s involvement in building an equal society remain among UNFPA’s top priorities. We work to increase the number of our partners, both institutions and individuals.”

A meeting with men organized by FAO and UNFPA to discuss the women’s empowerment agenda
Natia Tsikvadze, Policy and Capacity Development Specialist at UNDP in Georgia, notes that “UNDP actively supports rural women in acquiring and developing the skills necessary for economic activities and active participation in the labour market. We believe that such awareness meetings play an important role in empowering women, as raising awareness and sharing experiences are important for strengthening their collective representation”.

The joint initiative has also mobilized men to become familiar with and reflect on gender equality. The “Men Talking to Men” training session was conducted jointly by UNFPA and FAO. “Men Talking to Men” is a campaign that has been conducted by UNFPA since 2016 to support men in achieving gender equality. Integrating this campaign in the joint initiative enables men, who are involved in business and agriculture, to recognize gender equality in their economic activities. This can improve productivity, teamwork and output in the workplace, and can assist men in avoiding the reproduction of gender stereotypes. The partner organizations plan to continue organizing awareness meetings in new target regions in 2022.

FAO presents the first Country Gender Assessment report on Agriculture and Rural Development for the Republic of Moldova

The Republic of Moldova’s “National Gender Profile on Agricultural and Rural Livelihoods” report presents a snapshot of gender inequalities that affect various aspects of agricultural production and rural livelihoods in the country.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry and “Gender-Centru” Association, FAO Moldova organized a workshop to present and discuss the country’s first Country Gender Assessment (CGA) report. The event sought to obtain structured feedback and inputs from a broad range of stakeholders as part of the FAO validation methodology. The workshop coincided with the Day of the Agriculture Worker, marked in the Republic of Moldova on November 28, and the UN Campaign “16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence”. These two events were used to raise awareness among the wider public about the challenges and inequalities faced by rural girls and women.

Supporting women in Uzbekistan: from policy to action

Women represent about half of all agricultural workers in Uzbekistan and through daily hard work make a significant contribution to ensuring the country’s food security.
However, due to existing systemic and situational gaps and stereotypes, the important role of women in agriculture often remains unrecognized. FAO supports the Ministry of Agriculture and other organizations operating in the country’s agro-industrial field in strengthening capacities to develop and implement policies and solutions which mainstream the interests and needs of socially vulnerable groups, many of which include rural women.

Much was accomplished by FAO Uzbekistan in 2021, including the project entitled “Support in the implementation of inclusive agricultural policy”, implemented jointly with the Association of Women Agrarians of Uzbekistan. Together with the gender team at the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, the project developed the Gender Equality Strategy of the Ministry of Agriculture of Uzbekistan until 2030. The draft strategy envisages the achievement of at least 30 percent of women fully managing land resources by 2030. The ministry will improve social infrastructure for rural women and encourage a fair redistribution of household responsibilities, given the substantial amount of time that women typically spend on unpaid housework and child care.

In close collaboration with FAO, gender equality principles are also being incorporated into forest management policies and practices. A major achievement in this area was the development of the first long-term Gender Equality Strategy of the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Forestry for 2021–2025. The gender equality strategy was developed based on advanced international experience, through extensive consultations with representatives from ministries and departments, public organizations and stakeholders. The legal basis for the document was the Laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men” and “On the Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence”, as well as the National Sustainable Development Goals.

In October and November 2021, the FAO project “Sustainable Forest Management in the Mountainous and Valley Regions of Uzbekistan” conducted a series of seminars for employees of the Syrdarya, Dekhkanabad, Kitab and Pap State Forestry Enterprises to disseminate the Gender Equality Strategy of the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Forestry. The seminars also discussed the creation of gender councils within each forestry enterprise, tasked to respond to women’s issues, providing them with work and land plots on preferential terms, and involving women in forestry work.

As FAO project gender specialist Dinara Azimova reflects, it is easier to discuss women’s issues in the forestry enterprise in Dekhkanabad because it is headed by a woman – Ranokhon Bazarova – and it is an exception for a woman to lead a leshoz. According to the workers, she is a skilled and efficient manager and Dekhkanabad forestry enterprise is a leading example in the sector.

The project recognizes the importance of alternative income-generating activities for women, and as a result, organized a series of training sessions for the forestry workers in national crafts. In their free time, women embroider suzani, weave carpets, and knit warm clothes that protect them from the piercing mountain winds and unforeseen expenses, as handicraft sales yield significant economic benefits for women.

Similar training for women is being carried out as part of another FAO project, the “Central Asia Temperate Desert Initiative (CADI)”. In October 2021, this initiative organized business and handicraft training for the residents of Chuya village in Nurata district, Navoi region and Durmon village in Karakul district, Bukhara region. During the training, Matlyuba Bazarova, Vice-President of the Central Asian Craftsmen Support Association, gave an overview of the incentives available in the country to support current and enterprising artisans, and shared her expertise on the basics of marketing and creating jobs at home.

The FAO project “Support for the Implementation of Inclusive Agricultural Policies” also organized training for more than 250 women and men working in the Ministry of Agriculture, local authorities and other departments to improve capacities in implementing gender-sensitive measures that leave no one behind. Ongoing capacity building initiatives contribute to Uzbekistan’s efforts to achieve gender equality in agriculture and forestry.

**Women’s economic empowerment in Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan has been making considerable progress in achieving the SDGs. Yet, the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2021–2025 also highlights the development challenges that remain, including “gender, socioeconomic and spatial disparities between regions and urban and rural communities; challenges [in] accessing quality services in agriculture, … and environmental and

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conservation threats”. To close the gender gaps, FAO initiated the “Improved food security and rural livelihoods through women’s economic empowerment” (WEP) project in Azerbaijan.

The project has developed the country’s first ever Country Gender Assessment focusing on agriculture and rural livelihoods. The assessment delves into critical gender-based inequalities and their consequences for agricultural production and rural livelihoods in the country. In Azerbaijan, 56 percent of agricultural workers, including informal workers, are women. However, only 21 percent of formal employees in agriculture are women according to the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan’s figures. Although women are over-represented in agriculture, it is men who are regarded as the farmers and producers who manage land and production. In relation to this gender gap, the CGA notes that national strategic documents such as “Azerbaijan 2020: Look into the Future”, the National Action Plan on Gender Equality 2022–2025, and the Strategic Roadmap for the Development of Agriculture all include gender-mainstreaming provisions albeit in a limited capacity. The assessment also highlights the inadequacy of national sex-disaggregated data, for example, relating to access to and use of rural information and advisory services.

Based on the Country Gender Assessment findings, the project seeks to incorporate a gender-responsive approach in the work of Rural Advisory Services (RAS), ensuring women’s equal enjoyment of opportunities in agriculture while contributing more broadly to rural development and food security. In this context, the project embarked on building national capacities based on the assessment’s findings, delivering a two-day online training course on “Ways of improving the access of women farmers to RAS” for 45 rural advisory service providers from various regions across Azerbaijan.

To facilitate improvements in the relevance and accessibility of RAS services for rural women, the project also organized a study tour to Turkey involving the participation of RAS practitioners, rural women, and representatives from government entities and NGOs. Participants had the opportunity to observe how rural women empowerment’s is put into practice in Turkey. The delegation visited Orhanili Women’s Cooperative, Saitabad Rural Women’s Solidarity Association, Yigitali Women’s Agricultural Development Cooperative, and Karacabey Dagkadi Women’s Agricultural Development Cooperative. The exchange of real-life examples has significantly contributed to learning outcomes and gender mainstreaming beyond borders.

In its next phase, the project will support gender-responsive policy/programme development and implementation, and monitoring within the SDG framework. Within the scope of the project, FAO also aims to provide technical support for the development of gender-responsive policies and action plans at the macro level.

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