Rural women’s agenda is busier than ever in Europe and Central Asia

Amid the ongoing global challenges of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and climate change-induced disasters, rural women’s challenges and achievements are shaping the development agenda in the region. In this issue, we provide an overview of the latest stories, including the United Nations Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, International Women’s Day celebrations, the Country Gender Assessment workshop in Albania, and expert insights from Albania, Georgia and Türkiye.

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Empowering women for sustainable food systems and climate action

The Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), is set to address the pressing theme of reinforcing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development amid...
ongoing crises. Against the backdrop of global challenges, stakeholders in the UNECE region are seeking innovative and resilient solutions to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As part of this forum, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) Regional Offices for Europe and Central Asia convened a side event titled “Women in Sustainable Food Systems and Climate Action”. The side event elaborated on the crucial role of women in addressing food security and climate resilience. Recognizing the significant contributions of women to food systems, from production to household nutrition, the event aimed to spotlight their empowerment as a cornerstone of sustainable development. Through discussions led by diverse voices from the Western Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia, the event showcased experiences, identified promising practices, and explored policy pathways to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment in the context of SDG 2 (zero hunger) and SDG 13 (climate action).

During the event, Elisa Fernandez, UN Women’s Deputy Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, highlighted the pivotal role of women in addressing climate change and food security, underscoring the need for gender-responsive actions to achieve sustainable transformations. Raimund Jehle, FAO Regional Programme Leader for Europe and Central Asia, emphasized the urgency of addressing climate change and its impact on food systems, highlighting the interconnectedness of gender disparities and climate vulnerabilities. He referred to recent studies revealing significant income gaps and disparities in climate vulnerability, particularly affecting women in rural areas. In addition, he underscored FAO’s commitment to bridging gender gaps and supporting women’s empowerment through dedicated projects, advocating for women’s access to land, agricultural knowledge, decision-making roles and disaster risk reduction.

Community leaders, academics and development practitioners identified promising practices and outlined gaps and challenges with evidence from Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Among the impactful cases were the Agency for Development Initiatives in Kyrgyzstan and the Katalyst Moldovan Food Business Incubator. The Katalyst – the longest standing food bank in the Republic of Moldova – has supported more than 2 000 families in need, including Ukrainian refugees, by sourcing food from local Moldovan producers. The initiative has ensured food and nutrition security for those most in need through assisting local farmers at times of crisis. The Agency for Development Initiatives in Kyrgyzstan has supported women farmers with local seed production through training on seed cultivation and preservation to alleviate rural women’s dependence on imported seeds amid fluctuating prices. The discussions also focused on the critical role of women’s participation in water management, as demonstrated from experiences in Central Asia.

The outcomes of the session will inform the preparations for COP29 to be held in Baku, Azerbaijan and will contribute to the efforts of FAO and UN Women in the Europe and Central Asia region. In this context, the main recommendations of the event are:

- To increase support for women-led initiatives in rural areas, focusing on climate resilience practices, sustainable agriculture and water management.
- To create an enabling environment for effective action partnerships and identify specific needs and priorities for the participation of women’s groups as equal partners.
- To recognize the importance of gender sensitization of local actors at both central and municipal levels in the context of agricultural, water and climate-related policies.
- To realize the added value of working at the intersection of SDG 5 and SDG 6 for water-resilient and climate-smart agriculture.

International Women’s Day: celebrating inspiring women’s stories

In honour of International Women’s Day, FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia featured the stories of three exceptional women making waves in their respective communities: Majlinda Mehmeti from Albania, Ayşe Ayata from Türkiye, and Nabira I. Djumabaeva from Uzbekistan.
Majlinda Mehmeti leads the “Duarartat e Leskovikut” organization in Leskovik, Albania, and shared her journey of empowerment through the “Gender, Rural Equality and Tourism” (GREAT) project. Supported by the Ministry of International Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Italy, and co-implemented by FAO and UN Women, the project aims to boost the economic development of rural women. Majlinda Mehmeti reflected on the challenges and triumphs of mobilizing women in agriculture, emphasizing the transformative impact of collective action. Through the project, women like Majlinda Mehmeti are not only increasing their income but also amplifying their voices in their communities.

Ayşe Ayata has been a professor of gender studies and public administration at the Middle East Technical University in Türkiye for 25 years. She has worked as a team leader and consultant in several gender mainstreaming projects at international organizations including the European Union, the United Nations and the World Bank, and she is currently collaborating with the FAO-Türkiye Partnership Programme’s “Leaving No One Behind” project. Ayşe Ayata’s work sheds light on the multifaceted experiences of rural women in Türkiye. Drawing from extensive surveys and consultations, she highlights the evolving roles and challenges faced by rural women across different regions. From traditional family roles to entrepreneurial endeavours, rural women navigate a complex landscape of opportunities and constraints. Ayşe Ayata stresses the importance of sex-disaggregated data in understanding and addressing the diverse needs of rural women, advocating for targeted interventions to promote gender equality and economic empowerment.

Nabira I. Djumabaeva, Deputy Head of the Department of the National Centre for Knowledge and Innovation in Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Uzbekistan, underscores the vital contributions of rural women to agriculture and rural development. She highlights the ongoing efforts to address gender disparities in access to resources and opportunities, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive policies and legal frameworks. By empowering rural women and fostering an enabling environment for their participation, Uzbekistan aims to unlock the full potential of rural women and drive sustainable development.

Leading women’s voices in Europe and Central Asia emphasize the importance of awareness raising, economic empowerment and social inclusion in advancing gender equality. By prioritizing women’s rights, participation and economic empowerment, stakeholders can pave the way for a more equitable and sustainable future for rural women and societies as a whole, both regionally and globally.
the Assembly and Chair of the Sustainable Development Goals Sub-Commission, underscored the significance of regular reporting and monitoring of relevant SDGs. Milva Ekonomi stressed the continued prioritization of economic empowerment for rural women towards fulfilment of national priorities and international commitments, including the 2030 Agenda. Lorena Pullumbi, Assistant FAO Representative, highlighted the development of the Country Gender Assessment and other knowledge products produced under the GREAT project for informing gender-responsive policymaking.

The workshop, attended by various stakeholders from government bodies, United Nations agencies, civil society organizations, and the private sector, highlighted the collective commitment to advancing gender equality and sustainable rural development in Albania. Moving forward, the discussions and feedback will serve as a basis for the finalization of the CGA. Collaborative efforts are essential to translate the findings and recommendations of the assessment into tangible policies and interventions that can empower rural women and foster inclusive growth across rural communities.

Insights from the field: a conversation with a gender champion in Georgia

Iamze Mirazanashvili, Programme Assistant at FAO in Georgia, is supporting gender equality and women’s empowerment

Iamze Mirazanashvili’s gender mainstreaming journey started in 2014 when she was appointed as the gender focal point at FAO in Georgia. “Back then, gender issues were indeed relatively new for agricultural interventions,” says Iamze Mirazanashvili, who currently leads the programme team at the Country Office. Since then, FAO and its staff have initiated great leaps forward in achieving gender equality and empowering women in rural areas.

Iamze Mirazanashvili is part of a strong team that expanded FAO’s portfolio from USD 15 million to USD 40 million in Georgia and its outreach to vulnerable communities, including internally displaced people and those living in conflict areas. In this journey, the publication of Georgia’s evidence-based Country Gender Assessment was a breakthrough. “We prepared Georgia’s first Country Gender Assessment in 2018 which, for the first time, provided a better understanding of rural women’s current status and points of action that eventually fed into the country programming,” reflects Iamze Mirazanashvili. After five years of implementation, FAO in Georgia is now evaluating the progress made and updating its CGA.

“In the last five years, there has been clear progress in gender-sensitive legislation and now we are gradually transitioning to gender-responsive legislation. At service provision level, there are now more women workers in agricultural extension services in Georgia. However, the gender pay gap in agriculture is still persistent. There are deep-rooted stereotypes that result in the exhaustive engagement of rural women in unpaid domestic care work in households, causing time poverty and hindering their income opportunities. These challenges need to be addressed in the long term.”

According to Iamze Mirazanashvili, partnerships and role models are key to challenging gender stereotypes. For example, in 2021 and 2022, FAO in Georgia partnered with the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund and Liberty Bank to raise awareness on gender equality, reproductive health and rights, community participation, women’s economic empowerment, as well as banking services, among rural women. For this initiative, awareness-raising meetings were conducted in Shida Kartli, Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti, and Kakheti, engaging the women and men members of the Farmer Field Schools that were established by FAO. “FAO’s comparative advantage is that we work on the ground with rural communities; we constantly monitor their changing needs and priorities,” underlines Iamze Mirazanashvili. It is only by working with communities on the ground and facilitating the rise of role models, that gender stereotypes can be addressed – women who drive tractors, engage in fishing, or market dairy products in Georgia are challenging conventional wisdom about women’s roles in rural areas.

Even in more technical fields, there are restrictive stereotypes or less recognition of the need for gender analysis. Yet there are avenues for getting closer to gender equality. For instance, FAO is now helping to establish an animal identification registration traceability system in Georgia where the FAO team promotes women veterinarians, ensuring that the system is communicated to the public in a gender-responsive manner, and that system users can generate sex-disaggregated data.

“Asserting the gender equality agenda everywhere requires self-confidence, concerted efforts, and human and financial resources,” says Iamze Mirazanashvili. Capacity-building activities and knowledge products initiated by FAO have proven instrumental in boosting the awareness and confidence of FAO staff in gender mainstreaming in Europe and Central Asia; yet, without budgetary allocation by Country Offices, the gender equality agenda can’t achieve its full potential.
With the updated CGA, FAO in Georgia is setting a higher bar for its gender mainstreaming goals. Women’s economic empowerment will be a top priority. “As long as women depend on men’s economic capabilities, they are never free enough to make their own initiatives and to change the domestic power imbalance in their favour,” says Iamze Mirazanashvili. The FAO team in Georgia is poised to boost local economic opportunities and establish resilient market linkages to deliver lasting impact for the women of rural Georgia. As rural communities face unprecedented challenges, the achievements of the gender equality agenda in Georgia will continue to inspire development practitioners across Europe and Central Asia.

An expert’s insights on the status of rural women in Türkiye

Ayşe Ayata’s research with rural women in Türkiye sheds light on their economic, social and political status

In a recent interview with FAO in Türkiye, Ayşe Ayata, a senior gender expert with FAO’s “Leaving No One Behind” project, offered valuable insights and provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities faced by rural women across different regions of Türkiye.

Ayşe Ayata’s research under this FAO project focused on three provinces of the country, and she had previously collaborated with UN Women by conducting a survey and interviews with over 4 300 individuals in 29 provinces of Türkiye. The findings revealed a complex landscape, characterized by diverse socioeconomic profiles and evolving roles of rural women. Unlike the homogenous portrayal of rural women in previous decades, today’s rural women exhibit a wide spectrum of experiences and aspirations.

One of the most striking observations from the research is the shifting dynamics of rural life in Türkiye. Traditionally associated with unpaid family work and agricultural labour, rural women are now diversifying their roles and aspirations. The proportion of women engaged in unpaid family work has decreased, with many women transitioning away from agriculture towards other pursuits. This trend is particularly pronounced in regions like Central Anatolia and Eastern Anatolia, where women are increasingly disengaging from agricultural production and exploring alternative opportunities.

Despite these shifts, rural women continue to face persistent challenges, including limited access to resources, unequal inheritance rights, and social norms that restrict their mobility and agency. Ayşe Ayata emphasizes the importance of addressing gender-based inequalities to unlock the full potential of rural women. Equal inheritance rights, access to education and opportunities for entrepreneurship are crucial steps towards empowering rural women and enhancing their livelihoods.

Ayşe Ayata underscores the significance of sex-disaggregated data in understanding the nuanced needs and realities of rural women. By capturing the diversity of experiences across different regions and demographic groups, sex-disaggregated data provides invaluable insights for informed decision making and policy formulation and enables policymakers to design targeted interventions that address specific challenges and promote gender equality.

Looking ahead, Ayşe Ayata emphasizes the need for strategic interventions that prioritize the empowerment of rural women. Strengthening women’s inheritance rights, promoting entrepreneurship and fostering innovative approaches to agricultural development are essential steps towards enhancing the socioeconomic status of rural women. By harnessing the potential of rural women as agents of change, Türkiye can achieve inclusive and sustainable rural development for the benefit of all.

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Contact information:

FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia
Email: REU-Gender@fao.org
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Budapest, Hungary

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