

# UN panel says rural women need more resources and greater say in decisions

The lack of women's ownership of land, their difficulty in competing against imported agricultural products, and the exodus of rural workers in search of stable employment are major challenges to food security worldwide, participants in a UN panel discussion co-hosted by FAO said.

## Women must be involved in decision making

Developing effective programmes to eliminate hunger and extreme poverty will require getting rural women in agriculture directly involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives, the panelists told an audience of international diplomats, NGOs and others this week.

FAO held the panel discussion at UN Headquarters along with the Huairou Commission and WOCAN, two women's advocacy organizations which recently conducted a series of face-to-face consultations for FAO with hundreds of rural women from 23 countries. The event was part of FAO's efforts to give rural women a greater say in the global dialogue on food security.

FAO's Director of Gender, Equity and Rural Employment Division, Marcela Villarreal, and Ambassador Augustine Mahiga, Permanent Representative of the United Republic of Tanzania to the UN, moderated the panel. The discussion featured grassroots leaders from Asia, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean, the three regions covered in the consultations.

The panel discussion was held in connection with a meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which was presiding over a key review of the main international framework for gender equality and women's empowerment efforts, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

## Together women develop innovative coping strategies

The Beijing agenda covers 12 critical areas relating to women, including poverty, health, violence and inequalities between women and men in their access to a wide range of social and economic opportunities. Most areas directly or indirectly relate to FAO's work as the UN's lead agency dedicated to fighting hunger through agriculture and rural development.

The panelists, who had experienced or witnessed the effects of food insecurity in their communities, said women working together had developed innovative coping strategies, pooling resources to come up with communal kitchens, farming and livestock collectives, cereal banks, funding and credit groups, and other tools to improve community food security.

*"The grassroots women are also supporting indigenous knowledge in storage and planting of crops, which has been forgotten, but which are cost-effective and help the grassroots women to have food in their households."* said Violet Shivutse of grassroots organization GROOTS Kenya at a news conference following the panel discussion.

Shivutse participated on the panel along with Ruth Serech, a Mayan woman leader from Guatemala and Executive Director of the Coordinación de Desarrollo Integral de Mujeres Mayas (CODIMM), and Sri Sofjan of the Huairou Commission in Malaysia.

## Governments need to listen to rural women

But the efforts of rural women could only go so far without greater strategic support, said the panelists. They echoed many of the concerns raised in the FAO-commissioned report, saying that governments and their partners needed to listen carefully to the gaps identified by rural women and their coping strategies, using that information to provide more effective, strategic support to food insecure and agriculture-dependent communities.

Several issues emerged as common threads throughout the panel discussion:

- insufficient access to, and ownership, of land by women, even when national laws recognize their rights;
- lack of access to other productive resources, such as seeds and fertilizer, due to lack of markets in remote areas or lack of funds;
- the need for new agricultural technologies and training;
- recognition of the impact of climate change on women producers and support in their efforts to cope with, and minimize, its effects;
- increasing migration from rural areas to urban centers, especially by men and young adults, in search of stable employment, and resulting negative impacts, such as declines in rural productivity;
- the need to include rural women in policy and programme discussions that affect them.

At the news conference, FAO's Villarreal said the discussion showed that women, if listened to carefully, could provide much of the answer to the question of how to improve the fight against hunger and poverty.

*"The joint effort between FAO, WOCAN and the Huairou Commission has shown data coming straight from the field that illustrates the situation at the grassroots level. Also the groups have developed very specific and concrete recommendations that will no doubt help countries to address issues of hunger and poverty at the national level,"* Villarreal said.

Given the successes wrought at the community level by organized women's groups, the panel members and the audience stressed the necessity to provide women with more resources to enable them to construct stable and strong groups or associations.

✿ **For more information, please contact:**  
Melina Archer, Information Officer (ESWD)  
[melina.archer@fao.org](mailto:melina.archer@fao.org)

