



Europe and Central Asia Gender Newsletter

May 2021 — Issue #3



FAO collaborated with the Moscow National Research University Higher School of Economics in raising awareness in the region on the impact of the pandemic.

Policies on agri-food systems need to be gender-equitable and socially inclusive to be more productive, environmentally and economically sustainable, and resilient. This was the main message at 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”. The forum was organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in collaboration with the Moscow National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE). During three virtual sessions (10, 12 and 17 March 2021), participants representing policymakers, civil society organizations, academia and independent experts, the private sector, farmers and farmer organizations, and youth convened to discuss the pressing issues in agri-food systems policies and their connection to gender inequalities in rural areas in the region.

Vladimir Rakhmanin, FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia, and Raimund Jehle, FAO Regional Programme Leader for Europe and Central Asia, both used their opening remarks to call for urgent action to close the persistent gender divide in agriculture and rural areas in order to meet the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and address the effects of the pandemic. “Without women, we cannot speak about food security,” emphasized Evgenia Serova, Director of Agricultural Policy at HSE.

Roman Romashkin, Eurasia Center for Food Security, Lomonosov Moscow State University, gave a comparative overview of sex-disaggregated indicators in South Caucasus and Central Asia, emphasizing that since 1991, in many countries, the share of the female population in rural areas has been steadily increasing. Drawing upon a case study in Southern Tajikistan, Nozilakhon Mukhamedova, Justus Liebig University, confirmed that low salaries and a scarcity of jobs are driving men’s migration, leaving large numbers of *women* to shoulder

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the day-to-day tasks and challenges in their households and communities. *“While remittances contribute to the countries’ GDP, these remain unstable and not always reliable for rural women,”* Nozilakhon explained.

Ramona Duminicioiu, European Coordination Via Campesina, highlighted how policies responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in the region are leaving *“rural areas, smallholders and mostly women behind”*. And Marija Babovic, University of Belgrade and SeConS Development Initiative Group, referring to a recent study in Serbia, confirmed that during the pandemic, women living in rural areas reported the highest rate of income loss compared with rural men and urban women and men.

During the three webinars, the speakers stressed that rural women play multiple essential roles in agri-food systems as producers, wage earners and traders, but also as consumers, educators and community leaders. As Susan Kaaria, FAO Senior Gender Officer, summarized, to achieve food security for all, *“rural women’s contribution and their leadership [are] key”*.

Sharing experiences from across the region, delegates also focused on the unique challenges associated with gender norms that limit young women’s access to agricultural knowledge. Tamar Sanikidze, UNDP Agriculture and Farming Specialist, presented evidence from Georgia, where one of the main obstacles that hampers young women’s access to professional and agricultural educational centres is the distance from rural communities. Thus it is clear that cross-cutting gender- and age-specific needs and priorities need to be considered when designing programmes and policies for agricultural and rural development, and food systems’ transformation.

Some examples of promising practices initiated by governments, civil society organizations and private businesses were also shared during the webinars. Elena Polyakova, Corteva Agriscience, talked about her company’s social initiatives that highlight women’s and young people’s involvement in agriculture; and Hajnalka Petrics, FAO Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Programme Officer, introduced the *“Guidelines for collecting data for sex-disaggregated and gender specific indicators in national agricultural surveys”*. She emphasized that *“The first important thing that needs to be done is to systematically collect [sex-disaggregated] data on access to rural advisory services”*.

In total, more than 440 participants from 63 countries attended the webinars. A summary of the discussions was finalized to document key issues and recommendations raised during the three webinars. The summary, when ready, will be disseminated to all interested parties.

Female farmers in Azerbaijan work with experienced female mentors to improve their livelihoods



Olga Babayeva during an interview with FAO

Olga Babayeva, a 52-year-old farmer from the region of Samukh in northwestern Azerbaijan, is a well-known businesswoman in her community. Apart from being the largest producer of vegetable seeds for onions, coriander, dill, radish and parsley, among others, she is also recognized for her strong support of women’s engagement in farming.

Olga recounts that she became interested in farm life as a young child, spending her summer holidays helping her parents to plant vegetables. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a 19-year-old Olga became the first young female farmer in Fuzuli village when she started renting a 10-hectare plot to grow beetroot.

“But it was not that easy,” says Olga with a smile, who now cultivates a total of 14 hectares. For more than 30 years,

she has been active in the agricultural sector. As well as growing produce and managing *Barakat*, the vegetable seed cooperative (meaning “blessing” in Azeri), with 1 400 members, she has also established the Samukh Seed and Vegetable Corporation that provides laboratory testing for sorting and drying seeds. Today, the corporation sells seeds in both national and international markets.

“In the beginning, I faced situations when a tractor driver (who was usually a man) would refuse to cultivate my land just because I was a woman, or officials at the local government body neglected my requests as they did not accept the fact that a woman [could] be engaged in farming professionally,” reminisces Olga. *“Your place is in the kitchen’ – this is what women hear very often – ‘not on the land.’”*

Empowering rural women through agriculture has great potential in Azerbaijan. According to the national State Statistics Committee, 77 percent of women reside in rural areas, and the percentage of female entrepreneurs engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing is higher than men (32 and 24 percent, respectively). However, women face a number of challenges, including the gender pay

gap, the informality of jobs, the triple work burden (housework, household production work and wage work), and poor access to social services, hindering them from leveraging their full potential. In total, women conduct an average of six hours of unpaid work per day, while men spend only two hours on this type of labour.

Olga keenly understands the challenges faced by women in agriculture, as she has experienced many of them herself. As she explains, *“I was divorced with a little son and daughter. I had no option other than to earn our living to survive. I had to work much harder than any other [man] as I bore triple responsibilities; working on the farm and at home, as well as engaging in village initiatives. Today, my children are adults, but the perceptions and challenges are still there”*.

FAO recognized that Olga’s experiences and motivation to share her knowledge were invaluable for mentoring other women farmers. Consequently, Olga has taken part in several training sessions on farming and business management and will soon participate in a training of trainers workshop.

Since 2020, FAO, in cooperation with the Government of Azerbaijan, has been focusing on providing support to rural women to improve their knowledge and farming practices through the use of innovative technologies in cultivating fruit trees and vegetables, cattle breeding and poultry farming, in addition to other areas. As Flora Poladova, FAO Azerbaijan Lead Project Expert, points out, *“Women are engaged in agricultural production; however, they are less educated in sales and marketing, and have little information about micro-credits and non-financial services. With improved farming techniques, they will be able to do commercial farming. Increasing their income through essential business, marketing and leadership skills will, in fact, raise women’s self-confidence and make their voices heard”*. She also adds, *“FAO plays an intermediary role between female farmers and state and private service providers. We are working on stakeholder mapping now to bridge this, so that will help women to learn about free advisory services, soft loans and other services”*.



Wheat seed production is one of Olga’s main activities

To maintain momentum, the project mobilizes rural women’s groups and has already succeeded in connecting over 100 women farmers from across 20 regions in Azerbaijan. Olga is part of this network and communicates

with other members and shares farming knowledge via a mobile messaging app.

“I am so happy to be part of the big changes ahead!” beams Olga, adding that she is *“grateful that women are not alone and support is there. Women and girls deserve fair opportunities and treatment and, once financially stable, they will have a stronger voice to be equally recognized”*.

A warm wish comes true in Uzbekistan’s cold winter desert

Feruz Jaborova gets the keys from her pocket and unlocks the storeroom door. She opens one of the bags near the entrance, gets a handful of wheat grain and shows us the evenly-shaped reddish seeds. *“Aren’t they lovely?”* she asks with a touch of admiration in her voice. This is the first time in 23 years that she has seen such a gainful harvest. After getting married, Feruz and her husband moved to a new house near the hills, surrounded by large wheat fields. This new variety of wheat reminds her of those fields: *“I thought they were already extinct,”* she adds. Feruz has spent her life in the village, raising her four sons. During the day she works at a small convenience shop next to her house; and in her spare time, she grows vegetables in the backyard.

The village of Durmon, Uzbekistan, is situated in a cold winter desert 242 m above sea level, characterized by an ongoing process of degradation. Cold winter deserts have rain and even snowfall during the winter months. The community in Feruz’s village prefer to grow mainly winter crops including grains and orchard fruits, rather than water-consuming crops, because there is an extreme shortage of surface water, especially during the growing season. And this is not the only challenge – soil salinity frequently brings about reduced yields, and plant diseases and insects reduce grain production. Moreover, the substandard quality of seeds from the grain market also results in reduced agricultural production.

When FAO stepped in with a project to improve the lives of rural people in the area, project staff started with an assessment of the local community’s needs. The key priorities were to improve wheat yields through the distribution of winter varieties, combined with a series of training sessions on improved methods of wheat production. The International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), the project implementer, applied FAO’s concept of “Farmer Field Schools” (FFS) and Feruz’s eldest son, Muhammad, became one of the participants.

Feruz recalls the time last autumn when Muhammad came home with a bag of improved wheat seeds. *“We need to plant those,”* suggested Muhammad, but Feruz wasn’t enthusiastic. *“You work full time and I can’t manage it alone,”* she explained. After learning that her

son had gained new skills in time management, she agreed to try it. While Muhammad ploughed the land, Feruza sowed the new seeds by hand on five acres. As a comparison, the family purchased grain seeds from the market and planted these on a similar proportion of land.



Feruza's family demonstrating the different crop yields

Feruza could see the difference immediately. *“Look at the seeds!”* she says and fills a bowl of the commonly available wheat grain from a bag and another bowl with the new Shams variety. *“Compar[ed] to Shams, the widely used grain has shrivelled pieces and discoloured kernels in all sizes and shapes,”* she explains. Moreover, the improved variety had long awns which protected the grain from birds. But the biggest difference was in its ability to survive the hailstorm that hit Feruza's village in late April. It damaged the crops, breaking the spikes and causing lodging. Despite the storm, Feruza still harvested 256 kg of improved grain, while the harvest of market grain barely reached 75 kg.

Four and a half bags of wheat are enough to feed Feruza's family of eight for about three months, but she had already made her plans for the harvest during the sowing season. Some of the harvest has been saved for seed, and the rest will be used for Muhammad's wedding which will take place once the COVID-19 pandemic is over. *“While spreading the seeds, I made a wish to make bread from the harvest for his wedding,”* she smiles, wrinkling her eyes.

This activity was implemented with funding from the “Central Asian Desert Initiative” project, which is conducted by FAO as part of the International Climate Initiative (IKI). The Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) supports this initiative on the basis of a decision adopted by the German Bundestag.

Filiz, a former quality controller from Bursa, Turkey, discovers a new learning opportunity

Filiz is a 45-year-old Turkish woman living in her home district of Bursa, Kesel. She married by choice at the age of 20 after obtaining a technical high school diploma. Unlike her mother and many other women in the village that she knows, Filiz never faced pressure to stay at home

or get married, and her parents actively encouraged her to attend university. After graduation, Filiz worked as a quality controller in a textile factory for three years, before leaving work to take care of her children.

Today, her two sons are 20 and 15 and she considers herself lucky: *“My husband and children help me with almost everything around the house, but I still cook myself – no matter if I am tired or sick,”* she says with a smile. Despite spending no less than five hours a day on daily chores, Filiz decided to return to work so that her children can continue their education and the family can cover household expenses. Looking for a job took some time and the skills she obtained in her technical diploma were no longer widely used in the labour market.

Then in October 2020, Filiz decided to apply for skills development in the food industry and was invited by the Provincial Directorate of Agriculture in Bursa to attend a training course aimed at “refreshing” existing knowledge and gaining new skills.

The course, provided by FAO, is funded by the European Union in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services. It offers training on the different types of new technologies used in making food products such as tomato paste, pickles, jam and chocolate. And as Filiz explains, participants *“also learned how to use food containers so that it is safe, the chemical reactions that take place in food, food hygiene in general and so forth”*. FAO developed its training based on market need, so that women like Filiz can join this workforce and respond to the growing demand for this type of food.

Training was not the only project outcome – FAO, in collaboration with the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, also established offices to help the beneficiaries of the training to find employment, and 55 percent of those who found employment in the sector in 2020 were women.

“The knowledge of the technical subject gave me such a significant confidence boost that in the end I was able to express myself better after this training,” says Filiz, adding that the training staff were highly skilled and provided the participants with a safe space to discuss questions at length. Filiz, along with 174 women and 106 men, also participated in FAO's awareness-raising sessions on gender equality and women's empowerment, labour rights and liabilities, occupational diseases and accident protection, work ethics and personal hygiene. Participants were informed about governmental social assistance programmes and how to access these services for vulnerable people.

Filiz lives in an area of Turkey where there is a large refugee population. Competition for labour is high, which has contributed to tension between the different

communities. So the opportunity to participate in hands-on training to gain practical and social skills has been invaluable. Filiz elaborates further: *“I have made friends and built a strong social network with Syrian and Turkish women. We had a wonderful time exchanging and learning from each other”*. These skills help participants to support workers from different cultures to collaborate and work together collectively. Filiz concludes: *“I believe all women can achieve success and can handle any job. I thank FAO for giving me and other women and men this opportunity”*.

This project, “Building Resilience of Syrians under Temporary Protection and Host Communities in Turkey through Supporting Socio-Economic Integration and Creating Livelihoods,” financed by the European Union, aims to improve resilience and create better livelihood opportunities.



Filiz learning new skills at the tomato paste shop

Bridging theory and practice for enhanced crop production in Abkhazia region

44-year-old Kama Chukbar is the Head of the Agronomy Department at the University of Abkhazia. She became an agronomist “by chance” during a period of social and economic instability as a result of the armed conflict in 1992 and 1993. However, she remembers her academic years at the institution in Nalchik, Russia with pride:

“I was lost during my first year of studies and wanted to give up. I always wanted to be a doctor. However, during the second year when we started having specialized courses, I got so interested that the idea of quitting disappeared. Later, the Head of Department noticed my brilliant achievements. He encouraged me to persevere, entrusted me with a leadership role in the class. I received a scholarship to continue academic work. I obtained a PhD while additionally teaching”.



Kama demonstrates the stages of apple ripening at a Farmer Field School class

Years later, Kama decided to leave Russia to pursue research and support agriculture back home in Abkhazia. But when she returned, reality did not meet Kama’s expectations. At the first research institution where she applied for a post she was told, *“Because you are a woman, you would not be able to work efficiently”*.

It was a *“hurtful experience,”* Kama recalls. *“This was the first but not the last time when my abilities were questioned just because [I am] a woman. I can say that I always had to fight for my career throughout all these years. Nothing came to me easily.”* Despite encountering gender stereotypes throughout her career, Kama has been head of the Faculty of Agronomy at the Abkhaz University for more than 10 years now. She also acknowledges the positive role played by her husband and mother-in-law: *“In the Caucasus, family support is crucial for a woman to succeed.”* She adds, *“I was lucky”*.

Even though Kama has achieved a great deal in her professional sphere, she aspires towards further professional development and realizing her potential.

In 2020, along with 12 other local agricultural specialists and after obtaining extra technical knowledge from international agronomists at the Moldavian National Agency for Rural Development, she started working as a master trainer on the FAO/USAID project “Integrated pest management (IPM) through Farmer Field Schools in Abkhazia”.

Master trainers are plant protection experts who share their knowledge about climate-smart pesticide practices with other farmers to improve crop production and reduce the overuse of pesticides.

This approach to integrated pest management in Abkhazia, alongside FAO’s intervention to support practitioners, came about after a severe Brown Marmorated Stink Bug infestation in 2017, resulting in the loss of 80 percent of that year’s cash crops. Sole reliance on chemicals as a pest-control strategy over-exposes both

people and the environment, whereas climate-smart pesticide practices improve crop production and reduce chemical usage when it is not needed.

As Kyial Arabaeva, Head of FAO Project Office in Sukhumi explains, *“In 2019, FAO under the financial support of USAID, established a network of Farmer Field Schools to promote comprehensive measures for improved crop protection. This included monitoring of crop infestation, crop diversification and use of bio-stimulants. Farmers are supported by master trainers like Kama, to identify thresholds that technically and economically justify use of chemicals”*.

Kama knows that being a master trainer represents a good opportunity to gain this type of knowledge and share it with farmers. She supports two Farmer Field Schools: one focusing on tangerines, and the other on hazelnuts. *“This new role in bridging theory and practice through conducting real field experiments with practitioners who have been farming for many years was exciting!”* she says.

And regardless of all her experience and knowledge, Kama still tries to learn as much as she can about each subject and prepare herself for all sorts of technical questions before training the other farmers.

“I have to be ready,” she reflects, adding *“the assumption that a woman theorist will not be taken seriously is still present. I do not give up. No woman should”*.



Kama demonstrates hazelnut pruning

Kyial agrees that women do face difficulties in equal access to resources and **other** opportunities, and that this is due to many factors, including stereotypes that prevent women from realizing their full potential in a career in agriculture. She explains, *“Not only do we work on environmental issues – with the help of this initiative, we also support women to have equal opportunities with men by engaging them in knowledge sharing activities. Four other women agronomists working at the local university joined the FAO project as master trainers, like Kama did, and are contributing to improving the local farmers’ knowledge of plant protection”*.

Tajik women’s solidarity builds stronger households

“I am 46 and I am a successful entrepreneur, a mother of four kids and a wife of a wonderful husband,” says Sitoramoh Tojiddinova, a Tajik woman farmer from the district of Nurobod. *“I married early [at] 18 – being almost a child, having no higher education, knowing nothing about homemaking or taking care of kids. I was lost at [this] point, without basic life skills, but it was my mother-in-law who strongly supported me and it was she who taught me the skills to maintain everyday life on the farm and with the family. I cherish this experience it [has] helped me with the business that I am running now.”*

Agriculture is the main source of food and income in rural parts of Tajikistan. Sitoramoh and her family grew potatoes for their own consumption until one day, in 2020, her husband asked her if she would like to become a member of a local farmers’ cooperative. *“The cooperative is provided with seeds and supported with inputs [by FAO]. This may increase our harvest and we may sell potatoes for [a] living,”* he explained. At first, Sitoramoh was hesitant to join because she did not have any experience, but she knew that she could manage with her husband’s support.

As Masuda Saidova, FAO National Project Manager, explains, *“In Tajikistan, the husband’s and [male] relatives’ support is always crucial when it comes to women’s active participation in agricultural production at various levels of the value chain, including selling goods. Social norms limit women’s empowerment and they are either discouraged by family members, or choose themselves not to engage with public agencies. This complicates the process of registering farming enterprises, applying for loans, paying taxes on land or livestock, taking part in training and accessing extension services, in addition to other activities associated with agricultural production. FAO in Tajikistan, with financing from the European Union, supports smallholder farmers through practical training to produce and market agricultural products, benefitting from storage facilities, provision of machinery and other services. Participation of women and their empowerment is mandatory, but not always easy to accomplish. Sitoramoh was able to join the initiative because she was fully supported by the family and her spouse”*.

In addition to training, EU funds were also used by FAO to distribute high-quality potato seeds, which was of crucial importance as these are scarce during the sowing season in Tajikistan. The idea was to multiply use of this high-quality seed in rural communities to ensure greater food security and incomes for rural families. In May 2020, Sitoramoh received one tonne of “Red Scarlett” seed and

planted it on 0.20 hectares of land. Her family harvested approximately 23 tonnes of potatoes and returned 3 tonnes of seeds back to the cooperative for the next sowing campaign, as stipulated in the rules of the cooperative agreement. The next campaign will support new families in the community.

"I consider it to have a 'triple' effect – the food that you secure for your table, the money that you get for the rest of the crop and the solidarity that you learn from helping each other. This is what my mother-in-law once taught me to do," smiles Sitoramoh. She hopes that more women will join agricultural cooperatives, and she acknowledges the power of women's collaboration.

Being part of a joint effort has also helped farmers to establish a stronger voice in the supply chain and benefit from economies of scale through bulk purchase of inputs (seed, fertilizer, chemicals) and sales of products. Cooperatives importantly offer networks of mutual support and solidarity that enable greater self-resilience, the collective negotiation of better terms for contracts, prices and processes, and improved access to a wide range of resources and services.

"Last year, during a period of fertilizer shortages and skyrocketing prices, we jointly purchased fertilizers which resulted in cost savings for farmers. We had an opportunity to get a 20 percent discount for bulk purchasing of fertilizers," Sitoramoh explains, whereas *"in the past, as individual farmers, we had little bargaining or purchasing power"*.



Sitoramoh washes the new varieties of potatoes for cooking

Cooperative membership has a particularly strong and positive impact on women's decision-making opportunities at the household, group and community levels. Sitoramoh also acknowledges the potential and strength of this as a pathway to women's empowerment more generally.

Activities related to strengthening agricultural cooperatives form part of the project "Strengthening institutions and capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Veterinary Inspection Service for policy formulation," funded by the European Union. The main objective of this project is to assist the Government of Tajikistan with institutional reform of the agricultural sector, including food security and safety.

Acknowledgements

The FAO Regional office for Europe and Central Asia would like to thank:

Gulnaz Guliyeva, FAO Azerbaijan

Abdul Mustafazade, FAO Azerbaijan

Iuliia Kozlova, FAO REU

Kyial Arabaeva, FAO Project Office in Sukhumi

Bunafsha Azimova, FAO Tajikistan

Nariman Nishanov, FAO Uzbekistan

Temurbek Reymov, FAO Uzbekistan

Nour Arab, FAO Turkey

Ram Sharma, ICARDA

and other colleagues for their contributions and support in preparing this issue of the newsletter

Special thanks are extended to the many rural women and men who participated in FAO projects and shared their stories with us.

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