



Economic inclusion and social protection to reduce poverty Addressing gender inequalities to mitigate the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in rural areas

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The issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected nearly every rural household, with particularly serious effects on the most vulnerable. Mobility restrictions have disrupted livelihoods, while the economic downturn has pushed disadvantaged and vulnerable groups deeper into poverty, creating “new poor” and exacerbating gender and social inequalities. Women and girls have been disproportionately affected, due to existing gender inequalities, including inequitable access to and control over resources and services. School closures, elderly care and overwhelmed health services have increased the demands on women for unpaid care work. Across Europe and Central Asia, the time women spend on unpaid care and domestic work has risen due to lockdown measures, to 3.2 activities per woman versus 2.3 activities per man.¹

These implications are constraining women and men from partaking in economic activities as farmers, processors, traders and workers. The labour-force participation rate of women is high in Central Asia, averaging 45 percent, especially in the agrifood sector. Many women work in the informal sector, as self-employed smallholder farmers, producing goods for their own use or as contributing family workers. Not only do such jobs pay less, but they lack social, pension or health benefits, leaving rural women unprotected in case of illness or unemployment. During lockdown, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), microbusinesses and small rural businesses with a high share of female workers have suffered disproportionately, as they depend on access to markets, public spaces or movement more generally for economic activity. This has cut income and output and affected the growing season. Moreover, domestic violence against women and girls has intensified as a result of tensions triggered by containment measures.

The action

The programme aims to strengthen the resilience of rural women and their communities, particularly in the poorest and most disadvantaged areas of the region, to mitigate the socio-economic implications of the pandemic while leaving no one behind. It builds on successful practices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) at grassroots and policy level in the areas of economic empowerment, integrated community development and social protection.²

Budget: USD 2 million

Time frame: 2020–2024

SDGs



Related FAO policy briefs

- ▶ Gendered impacts of COVID-19 and equitable policy responses in agriculture, food security and nutrition
- ▶ Social protection and COVID-19 response in rural areas
- ▶ Impact of COVID-19 on informal workers

Partnership

To support women's empowerment across Europe and Central Asia, FAO builds on its strategic alliance with the Issue-Based Coalition on Gender Equality for Europe and Central Asia. FAO cooperates with expert networks and producer and civil-society organizations, such as the Central Asian Crafts Support Association Resource Centre (Kyrgyzstan), the Association of Women Agrarians (Uzbekistan) and Zan va Zamin (Tajikistan).

FAO will continue to leverage its existing partnerships in the region and seek to engage with new partners, including governments, bilateral and multilateral agencies, international financial institutions, development banks, the private sector and academia.

¹ UN Women. 2020. [The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's and Men's Lives and Livelihoods in Europe and Central Asia: Preliminary Results from a Rapid Gender Assessment](#). New York.

² For more details, please see: European Commission on Agriculture. 2019. [Advancing gender equality in the region, providing support to rural women in income diversification](#). Budapest; FAO. 2018. [Support to rural women and men in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan](#). Rome; FAO. 2019. [Catalogue of rural crafts from local raw materials: Kyrgyzstan/Uzbekistan](#). Rome



The programme will focus on: (1) supporting the productive capacities of female (and male) farmers by ensuring equitable access to resources, inputs and services and (2) raising the awareness of local communities on social norms and practices that perpetuate gender inequalities and undermine rural women's rights. It will enhance the technical capacity of rural women, as well as of the rural organizations and extension services, both private and public, to provide services that respond to the needs and priorities of women farmers. Rural women will learn about innovative and sustainable agricultural practices, improve their digital skills and get better access to extension services, e-marketing and e-finance. The programme will provide nutrition education and increase societal awareness of gender inequalities and violence against women, helping to change social norms and practices that assign women a lower status and generating greater recognition of their economic contribution.

At policy level, the programme will contribute to more effective recovery and rehabilitation efforts by raising awareness and strengthening the capacity of national stakeholders and decision makers to formulate and implement informed, socially inclusive and gender-responsive policies and programmes in their COVID-19 response in agriculture, with a particular focus on addressing the structural barriers rural women face in accessing productive resources and benefits.

The programme builds on synergies with FAO's regional and national initiatives, supporting smallholders and family farms through integrated community development, social protection and Cash+ social assistance schemes. It will draw on good practices, such as the FAO component of the United Nations Joint Programme on Rural Women's Economic Empowerment in Kyrgyzstan.

Expected results

The programme will contribute to strengthen national and local socioeconomic responses to the COVID-19 implications, by:

- ▶ **enhancing women's knowledge and skills to diversify and generate income**, strengthening their resilience to COVID-19 and related economic shocks;
- ▶ **improving the food security and nutrition of rural households** to protect against the impact of COVID-19;
- ▶ **strengthening the technical capacity of policy and decision makers at national and local levels to use gender analysis and gender-responsive approaches** when formulating and implementing rehabilitation and recovery policies and programmes for sustainable agriculture, improved food security and nutrition;
- ▶ **reducing gender-based domestic violence and bringing about positive change in social norms and practices** as a result of greater awareness of gender inequalities and women's rights.

Programme links

The programme aligns with FAO's Policy on Gender Equality, its [Regional strategy on gender equality 2019-2022](#) and the recommendations of the European Commission on Agriculture, to which FAO reports its progress on mainstreaming gender and empowering rural women. It ties in with the FAO Regional Initiative on Empowering smallholders, family farms and youth, facilitating rural livelihoods and poverty reduction as well as the United Nations Decade of Family Farming 2019-2028.

Country focus

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.³

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³ The list of the recipient countries may be expanded based on the evolving situation and FAO's ongoing country and regional assessments in the context of COVID-19.

