



Europe and Central Asia Gender Newsletter

July 2021 — Issue #4



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Women are the new face of beekeeping in rural Georgia, ensuring a steady family income during COVID-19

“For some reason, everyone thinks that a beekeeper should be a man, but that’s not the case here,” states Ketevan Bluishvili, a beekeeper from the village of Matani in the Kakheti region of eastern Georgia. In some regions, women are even explicitly banned from beekeeping, but in Ketevan’s family, beekeeping is a tradition. Both of her parents had been beekeepers, and she took over the family’s production of honey in 2009.

“I can’t stress enough how important it is for us, rural women, to have our own source of income, especially with this pandemic,” Ketevan says. The COVID-19 crisis has heavily affected the economy in Georgia, decimating the tourism industry and sales of wine – a traditional product of Kakheti. Many people living in the region, especially those who were more active in these sectors, have found themselves out of income. Families have struggled to meet ends, and very often, women have become the main income providers in their households. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit rural areas, local farmers started to feel the losses. But Ketevan, leading by example and providing advice, has inspired many women to start their own honey production to gain an additional source of income.

As a community leader in her village, Ketevan was approached by FAO to attend a Farmer Field School where

In this issue:

Case studies from:

- Albania
- Armenia
- Azerbaijan
- Georgia
- Kyrgyzstan

Other news from the region:

- Overview of FAO’s Gender equality and livestock strategy
- Training on gender and gender equality concepts for FAO staff in Kyrgyzstan

she received training in methods of modern beekeeping. This enabled her to deepen her knowledge and share the information on best practices with other women from the area. “I started with 30 beehives back in the day. Now I have 120 and I plan to expand more,” explains Ketevan. She has also helped to select other local female producers to attend the training programme. With FAO’s support, training and equipment, some of the women have even started production from scratch. “We local women are very motivated to start our own businesses, and we are very

eager to learn new practices from experienced trainers,” Ketevan adds.

Teimuraz Ghoghoberidze, President of the Georgian Beekeepers’ Association and one of the trainers contracted by FAO, emphasizes that women beekeepers face some key challenges. “One of the biggest challenges for beekeepers in Georgia is the lack of knowledge on modern approaches to the production of honey and honeycomb. This affects the quality of the production as well as their ability to sell it,” Teimuraz explains. In addition, other challenges include parasites and diseases affecting bees, a lack of modern equipment, as well as gaps in knowledge on how to brand and sell the products locally or for export.

Agriculture employs more than 40 percent of Georgia’s labour force and is a crucial sector for the country’s economic development. With this in mind, the European Union and FAO are working together under the European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (ENPARD) III that, since 2013, has supported rural communities and the agricultural sector in Georgia with the main goal of reducing rural poverty.

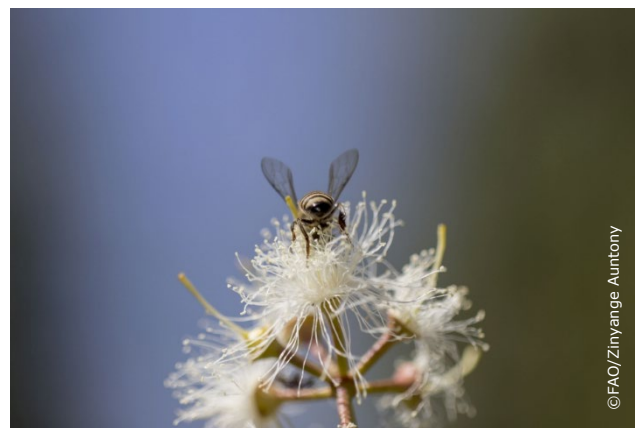
Under ENPARD, FAO provides technical assistance to the government and access to knowledge and investment opportunities for individual farmers, cooperatives and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). So far, FAO has established more than 80 demonstration plots and 10 Farmer Field Schools active in vegetable, dairy and honey production, in various regions of Georgia. More than 1 200 Georgian farmers, 25 percent of whom are female, have received hands-on field training from FAO agronomists so far.

“Our priority now is to train more farmers, especially women, and consolidate the work we are doing teaching farmers through demonstration plots and Farmer Field Schools, handing over the responsibility of training to lead farmers so that they can train other fellow farmers. This way, and with FAO’s technical support and guidance, we create an enabling environment for farmers to produce more, produce better and in a more sustainable way,” explains Javier Sanz Alvarez, EU-FAO Programme Coordinator. Ketevan has already started to look to the future, forming a local community network of female honey producers to cooperate under a single brand and take a bigger share of the market.

Community coaches facilitate local empowerment in Armenia

Hermine Gasparyan from Vanadzor city in the Lori region of Armenia is a 32-year-old young and motivated community development specialist. She was one of ten pre-selected participants for the Capacity Development training for coaches, conducted under FAO’s Local Empowerment for Actors for Development (LEAD) project, implemented jointly

with UNDP in the Lori and Tavush regions between 7 and 12 June 2021. As a core part of the community development subjects covered during the training, particular emphasis was given to increasing future community coaches’ capacity on mainstreaming gender and conducting gender analysis.



Pollinators increase the outputs of food crops

The project aims to contribute to reducing poverty, inequality and vulnerability through integrated, sustainable and participatory rural development by introducing the LEADER approach in Armenia. It also aims to improve employment, the rural economy, community empowerment and the livelihoods of the rural population and their resilience, while simultaneously protecting the environment, mainstreaming gender equality, and supporting young people’s and women’s empowerment.

Out of ten participants, five have already started work in the communities in the Lori and Tavush regions. Hermine, along with another two women, is among the five successful participants. The involvement of young women in rural and community development projects has a double effect – on the one hand, it empowers local youth and women to raise their voices and be more actively engaged in community development and decision-making processes; on the other hand, it ensures that organizations like FAO are more responsive to the needs and priorities of these groups.

“I am very happy to see that we have so many active and well-educated young women, who are interested in working in rural areas and are committed to making a difference for those living there,” says Viktorya Ayyvazyan, FAO International Rural Development Specialist and one of the trainers. “All women participants are self-confident and are ready to take the responsibility,” Viktorya adds.

Hermine has been engaged in public sector activities for more than 10 years, particularly in community development projects. “As the LEAD project objectives are quite similar to what I have been doing so far, to my experience, I decided to apply and try my skills here to understand what it can give me, so that I can apply these skills and knowledge in favour of my community and its people,” she says. “Besides my personal ambitions, community development is very important to me, and that’s why I am here,” she adds with confidence.

Hermine prioritizes women's empowerment programmes in her work. "Usually, if men talk more about economic development, women often talk about social development, which is very important in communities," she notes, adding, "As I am in favour of gender balance, I would like to see men and women equally involved in community development activities, especially if we are talking about teamwork. In a team, the involvement of both men and women is important, as they both have different roles and both are important. One is not predominant over the other one, but they complete each other and produce better results when working together".

Hermine thinks that what matters most in her work is the person's competence, skills and experience working with communities. It is about being open and involved, rather than being female or male. But she also acknowledges that, "...women understand women's problems better than men do, and if they [women] are not involved in needs assessment and decision-making processes, as well as in finding solutions to existing problems, we will have a situation where a large group's interests and needs are not considered and addressed".



Lead project community participant project

Hermine also talks about the obstacles and hardships that women face in their work, especially those who have family, children or elderly parents, since it is women who shoulder all of the care work. She observes that in Armenia, society assigns men and women different social roles and responsibilities, resulting in less time for women to participate in social activities or advance their careers. At the same time though, there are strong women, who fight for their right to be active and are involved in social and professional life. Hermine is confident that society can enable these women so that they can serve as role models for others.

"Family support is very important in this context," Hermine explains. "I have been involved in different projects for quite a long time, sometimes working extended hours, with lots of travelling to different marzes [regions] and communities, but I have always received my family's – first my parents' and later my spouse's – encouragement and support. Even when I sometimes doubted whether I could

or could not do it, or whether I should apply or not, my husband always inspired me and cheered me up for at least trying." According to Hermine, we should always try. Even if we are not successful, we will learn and gain valuable experience in the process.



Awarding a certificate

"Because I am from Lori and had to stay in Yerevan for a week during the LEAD project training, my husband took care of our baby the whole time so that I could participate," says Hermine, adding, "I always share my own personal experience with my male friends and colleagues. I feel that this creates a more balanced and positive atmosphere in family relationships and builds up trust between family members". Hermine believes that it is imperative not to force a woman to choose between her work and her personal life, but rather give her the opportunity and freedom for growth: "Women are strong and they can successfully multitask". She concludes that women, "should not be afraid and should believe in themselves and their abilities; never stop learning and never stop dreaming".

GREAT starts in Albania

FAO and UN Women have joined efforts to launch the Gender Rural Equality and Tourism (GREAT) project with support from the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation. The overarching goal of this 3-year joint initiative is to contribute to rural women's economic empowerment in Albania and strengthen women's roles and contribution to rural development in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its core principle of leaving no one behind.

Economic empowerment of rural women is critical for the continued improvement of agriculture and further development of the rural sector. Rural women's economic empowerment is also key to improved food security and nutrition and sustainable livelihoods. In Albania, women are essential contributors to various agri-food value chains, providing authentic products for tourism.

Women's contribution to agriculture in Albania is significant: 54 percent of employed women work in this

sector. However, often this contribution remains invisible because of women's high levels of informal employment. Women also face challenges in rural entrepreneurship and income diversification. Many women have unequal access to land rights, limited understanding of which businesses are profitable, and are disproportionately engaged in unpaid activities. In addition, there is a lack of financial support mechanisms tailored to the needs of rural women.



Milva Ekonomi signing the GREAT project agreement

Arben Kipi, Assistant FAOAR in Albania, explains more about how the project will work: "Value chains of local and traditional products with a strong rural women's engagement and perspective will be selected in each implementation area. The support along these value chains will aim to add value to the final product, facilitate cooperative work in terms of both horizontal and vertical cooperation, improve access to markets, and strengthen rural women's role in agriculture and rural development". Project activities will be implemented in the Puke, Elbasan and Erseke-Leskovic regions. The primary beneficiaries will be rural entrepreneur women, owners, managers, technical personnel of women-led small and medium rural enterprises, craftswomen, and unemployed women who want to set up small businesses. It is envisaged that the project will engage with a total of 1 500 rural women and their businesses, with an additional 300 rural women entrepreneurs reached via the incubator interventions.

Overall, the programme will contribute to the sustainable economic development of rural women and their communities in target municipalities. Realization of the project activities will ensure that women in the target areas have greater control over their own lives, can exercise their rights and have opportunities to realize their legal, economic and social independence.

Merita Mece has recently joined FAO as a Gender Specialist/ Project Coordinator. She explains how the project draws upon earlier national and international best practices to shape a new initiative tailored to the needs of rural women in Albania: "[t]his project is based on best practices implemented in other countries and tries to extend them in the Albanian context, applying innovative approaches that intend to promote the role of 'farm co-manager' as

a viable method that can reduce women's informal work and increase their access to social protection, income and decision-making. It also aims to enhance the capacities of rural advisory services at the local level to provide gender-responsive services for rural tourism, agri-business and value chain development. It will closely work with national authorities to design and implement a gender-responsive legal and policy framework which will contribute to the sustainable economic empowerment of rural women".

The newsletter will closely monitor the development of the project and post regular updates on its accomplishments.

UN joint programme to empower women farmers from Kyrgyzstan

Tursunai Akmatova lives with her family in the village of Baizak in the Naryn region, Kyrgyzstan. After graduation, she started work as a teacher in a rural school, and could not imagine that one day she would become a successful farmer and a member of the local *kenesh* (council). Tursunai, like many other women in Kyrgyzstan, did not believe or know that it was possible to live differently – to be a leader and enjoy rights and opportunities on an equal basis with men – until she became involved in the "Accelerating Progress towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment" programme in 2015. The project, a joint initiative of four UN agencies – UN Women, FAO, WFP and IFAD – is aimed at improving food security, promoting income-generating activities, increasing participation in public decision-making, and creating a gender-sensitive culture in society. Kyrgyzstan has been involved in this multi-agency global initiative since 2012, alongside participating countries Ethiopia, Guatemala, Liberia, Nepal, the Niger and Rwanda.

Tursunai joined the programme together with another 3 371 Kyrgyz women engaged in productive and sustainable agriculture in the provinces of Batken, Chui, Naryn, Osh and Jalal-Abad, where project assistance has led to a productivity increase of 30 to 70 percent on the women's yields. With FAO's support, Tursunai has learned about farming and healthy food cultivation, the differences between crops and how organic agriculture affects her health and the health of her family.

Taking the initiative herself, Tursunai very quickly mastered all of the knowledge provided by the training specialists and started a self-help group, opening an Association of SHGs in Baizak village with 50 women entrepreneur members. Together, they are now engaged in farming – growing vegetables and fruits with the use of smart agricultural technologies. In 2018, donors entrusted them with the management of a new workshop, where the women can the fruit and vegetables to sell to customers.

Along with women like Tursunai, Aichurok Abdaliev – a resident of a different village in the same region – was able to become a successful farmer on land where no one

thought that anything but potatoes could grow. Like other participants of the JP RWEE project, Aichurok received fruit and vegetable cultivation training, and participated in other capacity building events on leadership, accounting and marketing. As a result, she was able to unite to form a self-help group with other women from her village.



Aichurok, a JP RWEE beneficiary, in her field

Both Tursunai and Aichurok became members of the “Bar El” association, which along with another four producer organizations established by the project, started providing services to at least 1 700 women members to access inputs, extension support, finance from its revolving capital, information and joint marketing. These organizations will facilitate the joint procurement of inputs, joint processing of produce and better negotiating power with other value chain actors. The cumulative revolving capital of the four organizations is over USD 107 000, which is then used to fund the group-based business initiatives of rural women. “The fact that we bring money to our families has given us an opportunity to decide on many things at home, including where the money should go. Moreover, I realised that I would like to develop my leadership skills and contribute to the development of my village. I put forward my candidacy for the local council and was able to prove that politics is not just for men – that women can and should do it too,” reflects Aichurok.

More than 600 women activists and project beneficiaries were interested in applying to local councils and participating in local self-governance processes. They were offered participation at leadership schools, and specific training and mentorship sessions on political participation, election processes and gender-sensitive local governance by the project. As a result, at least 15 women were elected in the recent 2021 elections.

On 17 June 2021, the National Day of Rural Women in Kyrgyzstan, the UN Joint Programme hosted a final conference to mark the completion of the first phase of the initiative. During the event, Aichurok and Tursunai, along with other participants, shared their successful experiences and demonstrated how women farmers from all over Kyrgyzstan can support each other in their future efforts.

It was important that representatives from the Ministry of Health and Social Development, the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry Management of the Kyrgyz Republic, other national partners, the private sector, the donor community and NGOs were engaged in the discussions as they were able to jointly develop recommendations on how to involve these groups in their work and consolidate the results of this programme since 2012. As Adnan Qureshi, FAO Representative in Kyrgyzstan, says: “Women’s efforts not only improve household nutrition and positively impact food security; they also accelerate change in their villages and communities as a whole”.

Flora Poladova, FAO Project Lead, talks about the “Rural Women’s Economic Empowerment” project in Azerbaijan



Women beneficiaries at the National Conference

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 in rural areas 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.

The FAO in Europe and Central Asia gender team has interviewed Flora Poladova, Project Lead for the Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEP) initiative in Azerbaijan, to understand the progress that the project has made and the challenges it is facing.

Q: What are the main areas of intervention for the project?

A: The WEP project was designed at the request of the Azerbaijani government and was launched in January 2020 under the FAO-Azerbaijan Partnership Programme. It aims to enhance the productive potential of rural women by improving their access to agricultural services, knowledge,

financial resources, means of processing and markets. In other words, we support women to engage in fruit cultivation, hazelnut gardening, vegetable growing and livestock breeding, by providing agricultural training based on new methods and innovations. Qualified specialists in cultivation, breeding, and pest and disease management connect with project beneficiaries to develop successful agricultural practices.



A meeting to identify the needs of the beneficiaries

In addition, we provide women's groups with equipment that can help them to cultivate or process the products they are engaged with: hazelnut crackers, milking machines and devices to produce cheese are very popular among these. For instance, hazelnut cracking is a very time and effort-consuming procedure, and women's access to these technologies reduces the work burden significantly.

To sustain the FAO approach, we also work with rural advisory services to make their consultations for rural communities more targeted and consider the different needs of women and men farmers. In addition, FAO cooperates with the Agrarian Credit and Development Agency in the Ministry of Agriculture of Azerbaijan to educate women about available credit services. They join our consultations with rural communities for better information flow on the opportunities that exist.

Q: What challenges have you encountered in your work?

A: The COVID-19 pandemic and mobility restrictions created difficulties for us visiting the regions to undertake presentations and meet people. For this reason, we had to mobilize women farmers with the help of mobile connectivity and the Azerbaijan Rural Women's Association. With support from the local authorities and women leaders, a WhatsApp group with 200 women farmers from 12 regions was established to connect project personnel and women so that they could share their experiences and learn from each other. This type of communication meant we could see that beneficiaries were interested in knowledge and experience sharing, and in visiting each other for purpose of learning. For example, the group leader from the region of Tovuz visited the "Yasemen" women's group in Qakh to learn how to establish and manage bakeries. The project

team also used this group as the main communication channel to update beneficiaries on current and future project activities.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the capacity development training sessions were conducted online. So far, we have delivered 20 online training sessions on topics such as pest and disease management in cattle and poultry / crop production, fertilization of agro plants, feeding agro animals, beekeeping farm management, agro-tourism, business plan development and seasonal care of fruit gardens. The training sessions were recorded for future reference and will be used to reach out to more people.

Additionally, in certain remote and mountainous pilot areas, we encountered issues relating to social practices around women's autonomy, for example. To address these barriers, the project team invested efforts into changing the behaviours of rural communities to reduce stereotypes and strengthen women's agency and autonomy. The project delivers awareness-raising sessions built around a range of topics, including the different needs of women and men, the challenges that women face, and recognizing women's contribution to agriculture and household wellbeing. FAO's partner, the Azerbaijan Rural Women's Association, an organization which connects 44 women's groups from across 22 regions of Azerbaijan, is closely involved in conducting the awareness-raising sessions. They have reported that this sensitization of male members of the community helps women to actively engage in the project. A monitoring mission carried out in June 2021 also commended the high numbers of women seen at a project event in Tovuz region. As of today, we have 27 beneficiaries from this area compared with 2 at the beginning of the project.

Q: Does the project help partners to understand women's issues at the national level as well?

A: One of the challenges faced by the project is ensuring that national and local authorities understand the importance of gender issues and the need to develop gender-responsive programmes and interventions in agriculture and food security. Consequently, we continue to collaborate with the authorities on gender issues and gender-responsiveness. We also envisage the development of a Country Gender Assessment (CGA) to produce a consultative knowledge framework for better informed, targeted and gender-sensitive actions in agriculture and rural development. The proposed CGA will provide an overview of, and basic country-level information and data on, rural women's needs and priorities, as well as identifying any remaining gaps and challenges for gender analysis in agriculture and the rural sector. Alongside this, it will include a set of recommendations for national partners on how to strengthen gender equality and women's economic empowerment in rural areas.

Q: What is your message to those practitioners in the field who work on similar projects?

A: Believe in your success and work towards your goals. Educate yourself about the issues rural women face; give them the feeling that you are there to help. I really feel that that continuous motivation pays off – women formed the groups on their own initiative and worked to create group businesses. Many of them have discovered their potential as mobilizers – they organize meetings and act as the voice of the group in meetings with local authorities. Today, there are so many women who want to join the project!

FAO has developed a Gender equality and livestock strategy for Europe and Central Asia for the period 2021–2025



The “Gender equality and livestock strategy” is the result of a continued and intensive collaboration between the gender and livestock technical teams of FAO in Europe and Central Asia. It primarily builds upon the contributions and views of regional stakeholders which were provided during the Regional Gender Equality in Livestock Workshop, organized in November 2019 (Budapest, Hungary) with the participation of 18 country representatives.

Globally, livestock is the second largest contributor to the agricultural economy after crop agriculture, and the world food economy is currently being driven by a dietary shift towards animal-based products due to an increase in demand for meat products in developing countries. This is in line with the increase in livestock production in Eastern European countries, and especially in Central Asia which is characterized by its vast pastureland resources.

Both women and men actively contribute to animal production in the region and women are key actors in conserving livestock diversity. In rural livestock-based economies, women make up two-thirds (approximately 400 million people) of low-income livestock keepers globally

and are particularly involved in small livestock production (poultry, sheep, goats), milking and milk processing. However, despite their important contribution to livestock production and management, women often face greater challenges than men in accessing, for example, inputs, machinery, advisory services, credit and decision-making processes. Relatedly, they are also often more exposed to inadequate working conditions, occupational health and safety issues, and insufficient knowledge about animal health surveillance and the prevention and treatment of animal diseases. These gender-specific constraints have significant consequences on the productivity and food security of livestock-keeping households.

Considering the challenges discussed above, FAO’s Gender equality and livestock strategy aims to eliminate gender constraints and contribute to greater gender equality and social inclusion in agriculture by: collecting and analysing sex-disaggregated data in livestock; securing vulnerable farmers’ access to land, livestock, other natural resources and decision-making; increasing access to training (as due to various structural constraints, rural women have insufficient knowledge of innovative practices, animal health surveillance, disease recognition, and prevention and treatment of animal diseases); and supporting women’s business development through better access to credit, assistance to women’s dairy associations, and the establishment and development of entrepreneur groups.

This strategy is part of FAO’s commitment to work towards gender equality in the area of livestock and will guide national partners and staff at all levels throughout the planning and implementation processes.¹

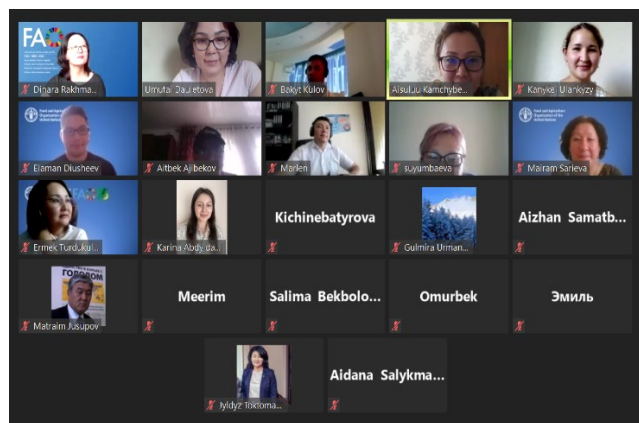
Gender equality and gender mainstreaming training for FAO Kyrgyzstan staff

The FAO Office in Kyrgyzstan recently organized a two-day workshop for 21 staff members to raise awareness about gender concepts and become more confident in design, implementation and formulation of project results from a gender perspective. Fourteen women and seven men from programming and operations, HR and administrative teams brainstormed and engaged in active discussions on gender issues in the context of Kyrgyzstan and about how they can better contribute to organizational objectives in agriculture and rural development to advance gender equality.

“This workshop was based on the results of the gender stocktaking report, produced by the Office in 2020 as part of the FAO Policy on Gender Equality Minimum Standards. The report recommended a series of capacity development events for FAO staff to make us capable and equip us with the tools to implement both international and FAO commitments,” says Dinara Rakhmanova, Assistant FAOR and the Gender Focal Point at the FAO Country Office in Kyrgyzstan. She adds, “When specific women’s issues in

¹ The full text of the strategy is available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/cb5153en/cb5153en.pdf>

Kyrgyzstan, such as lack of inheritance rights, the gender pay gap and economic dependence, were presented in a question-and-answer format, including visuals, the participants had a better understanding of why we introduced the topic and the importance of challenging gender norms in our projects. The post-test assessment revealed that almost 100 percent of the staff found the training useful”.



Staff from FAO in Kyrgyzstan at the gender training

“We have also taken part in an exercise on how we, as project managers, should consider the different needs of women and men when we are developing different projects and initiatives. It was clear that when designing an action, communities have to be consulted in the discussions and we should make sure that their voices are heard. In addition to this, we need to ensure that rural institutions have the capacity to operate with a gender lens, and thus, they need to be made aware of gender issues,” says Matraim Jusupov, National Project Manager for FAO in Kyrgyzstan and a participant at the training. Matraim adds, “It would be beneficial to continue learning as there is a lot to consider to improve rural women’s lives”.

This training was supported by the FAO REU gender team and was facilitated by Aisuluu Kamchybekova, National Gender Mainstreaming Consultant and Umutai Dauletova, Gender and Social Inclusion Specialist.

Acknowledgements

The FAO REU gender team would like to thank the following colleagues for their contributions and support in preparing this issue of the newsletter:

Aisuluu Kamchybekova, FAO Kyrgyzstan
 Karina Abdylbaeva, FAO Kyrgyzstan
 Teimuraz Kighuradze, FAO Georgia
 Ani Grigoryan, FAO Armenia
 Viktorya Ayvazyan, FAO Armenia
 Aisela BeqirAga, FAO Albania
 Merita Mece, FAO Albania
 Flora Poladova, FAO Azerbaijan

Special thanks are extended to the many women and men who shared their stories with us.

For comments and suggestions, please contact us by email at REU-Gender@fao.org. Further contact information is also provided below.



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