



**Message from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
on the occasion of the 16th International Day of Cooperatives**

Cooperatives: A pathway to women's empowerment in rural areas

- **Rural cooperatives empower women**

Agricultural cooperatives can be an effective means to empower women in rural areas and help them to overcome the constraints they face in accessing education, knowledge and information, as well as productive assets.

Cooperatives can provide a wide range of economic and social services to women in rural areas. These include access to input and output markets, as well as financial services such as credit and insurance. By acting collectively within cooperatives, women increase their bargaining power and income while reducing their transaction costs. In addition, cooperatives play an important role in job creation by directly supporting productive self-employment and generating additional employment opportunities.

Ultimately, cooperatives can create a safe environment where women increase their self-confidence, identify their own challenges, make decisions and manage risks. Cooperatives can enable women to exercise political leadership and to learn about financial profitability and accounting. As a result, women are empowered and become active agents of change, entrepreneurs and promoters of social transformation who can improve their own lives and those of the community.

However, to date women's active involvement and leadership in agricultural cooperatives continue to be rather low. Beyond the social, political and economic constraints, women often face cultural barriers that restrict their involvement in public meetings or that place their domestic responsibilities before their economic or social involvement in agricultural cooperatives. In some countries, this is due to the basic fact that only owners and tenants of land, most often men, can become members of agricultural cooperatives or that the fee charged for cooperative membership is beyond the means of economically dependent rural women.

- **There is still much to be done to strengthen women's participation in cooperatives**

Pro-active measures are needed to promote women's effective participation in rural cooperatives by encouraging women's leadership in mixed cooperatives and/or supporting the establishment of women-only cooperatives, according to local needs and contexts.

Particular attention is needed to raise awareness of the importance of promoting women's effective participation in "mixed" cooperatives. Mixed cooperatives that are gender equitable bring together complementary skills and perspectives that can equally benefit all members.

In addition, the establishment of women-only cooperatives can be a valuable strategy for women to develop their own businesses, based on their economic and social needs and realities. Numerous women-only cooperatives demonstrate that women are capable of developing their own businesses and improving their technical knowledge and organizational self-help capacities.

Better quantitative data are needed to demonstrate to policy makers why women-only rural cooperatives and mixed cooperatives can be an important pathway for rural women's social, economic and political empowerment. More data is needed on the extent of women's participation as members and as leaders, in order to identify constraints, lessons and the added value of joining such institutions. Development programmes and projects should consider earmarking resources to improve women's skills and participation in producers' organizations and cooperatives and to increase the capacity of cooperatives to address the needs of both men and women and to empower women. Another powerful tool is the establishment of quotas for women's participation and representation and ensuring that these are incorporated in the design of projects and policies aimed at supporting these organizations.

The effective participation of women in cooperatives is key for redressing some of the imbalances between women and men in decision-making processes related to agriculture and rural development.