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Rural women: the invisible mainstay of sustainability

- Published on October 13, 2017



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Women and girls are central to the sustainability of rural households and communities, improving rural livelihoods and overall wellbeing, but their role and significance is often overlooked. In fact, they are [almost](#) half of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, in addition carrying out the bulk of unpaid care and domestic work within families and households. Their knowledge and experience in food security and nutrition, land and natural resource management, bring additional resources to resilience against the negative effects of the changing climate on rural livelihoods.

Women farmers are just as productive and enterprising as their male counterparts, yet are not always able to obtain comparable prices for their crops. Nor do they have equal access to the land, credit, agricultural inputs, markets and high-value agrifood chains that are essential to their livelihoods. In a [joint programme](#), UN Women, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the World Food Programme are working together to change this. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, women are

using climate-resilient approaches to grow produce in extremely cold conditions, with packaging and marketing that add value to their products for higher-priced urban markets. In Rwanda, the UN joint programme is promoting greenhouse horticulture by women farmers' cooperatives, harnessing renewable energy for increased production and reducing adverse environmental impact. Again, the programme links women's cooperatives with hotels and supermarkets so that the women's produce can fetch higher prices.

Through training and skills development, rural women and girls can play a much greater role in the development of green food and agricultural value chains, both as current and future agricultural workers and entrepreneurs. This needs to be further supported by the provision of decent work with established terms and conditions that can stimulate and secure women farmers' participation in green value chains. Women farmers can also play a significant role in protecting biodiversity through use of indigenous crops and agro-ecological farming methods that are environmentally friendly and free of toxic chemicals. In all of this, governments play a vital role: providing the social and physical infrastructure that enables rural women's participation in sustainable, climate-resilient agricultural production, processing, transport and marketing.

Rural women are highly capable and knowledgeable custodians of their land, and can move further ahead to more fully and effectively participate in green value chains, including by profitably and sustainably linking rural and urban markets. But life in a rural setting does not and

should not lead inevitably to agriculture: rural girls have an equal right to their urban peers to a good education, careers in STEM and a thriving role in the digital revolution. Similarly, being born a girl should not automatically lead to a future of unpaid caring for family members. Addressing this requires recognizing the importance of care as well as reducing the time spent on it—by governmental investments in basic infrastructure and in time- and labour-saving technology. Only once these inequalities are purposefully levelled, will both women and girls, whether rural or urban, be able to take their place at the heart of the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the growth of a better future for us all.

More on the International Day of Rural Women:

<http://unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/rural-women-food-poverty>

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