

Securing the Rights and Livelihoods of Rural Women in Africa in the Context of the Food Crisis and Climate Change



UN PHOTO/JACKIE CURTI

Dr. Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, handing over a plant for distribution.

KEY MESSAGES:

“Rural women play a key role in food production and food security in Africa”

“Governments, development partners and the private sector should enhance their productive capacities, their right to land, credit and services, and their access to market opportunities”

“If it benefits rural women, you can call it development!”

Facts and Figures

Women represent the majority of rural populations and of the agricultural workforce in Africa

- In Africa, a great majority of the population lives in rural areas and is fully dependent on land and other natural resources for its livelihood: e.g. Niger (83%); Rwanda and Malawi (81%). Women make a great proportion of rural populations due to male migration (UN Statistical Division Database).
- In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), 31 % of rural households are headed by women, compared to 17% in Latin America and the Caribbean and 14% in Asia (UN Statistical Division Database).
- The FAO reports that in SSA women produce up to 80% of the basic foodstuff. Women provide about 70% of all the agricultural labour and produce about 90% of the food (FAO Fact sheet on gender equality).
- According to World Bank estimates, agriculture self employment by sex in Sub-Saharan Africa amounts to 54% for women and 57% for men (WB, 2007). The FAO gender agri database mentions that in some African countries, women manage the majority of agricultural holdings with the highest percentages recorded in Lesotho (55%), Cape Verde (53%) and Malawi (52%).

However agricultural policies and plans still neglect gender issues

- Gender issues are still insufficiently addressed in the development and financing of agricultural policies and plans. The World Bank deplores that while women account for more than 50% of the labor force in the agricultural sector, and that they are responsible for three-quarters of food production in sub-Saharan Africa, the design of many development policies continues to assume wrongly that farmers and rural workers are men (World Bank 2007).
- A study states that if women farmers in Kenya had the same access to farm inputs, education, and experience as their men counterparts, their yields for maize, beans, and cowpeas could increase as much as 22% (Quisumbing 1996, cited in World Bank 2007). This would have resulted in a one-time doubling of Kenya's GDP growth rate in 2004 from 4.3% to 8.3% (World Bank 2007a). The World Bank warns that constraints faced by women farmers are not only costly to food security but also to economic growth.

Rural women's access to land is very low

- Overall, not even 2% of land is owned by women in Sub-Saharan Africa. A 2001 study of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in Kenya notes that although women contribute 75% of labour, they own only 1% of the land. Another study indicates that women are 5 percent of registered landholders in Kenya and that on average, men's land holdings were almost three times the women's land holdings (cited in Deere and Doss, 2006).
- In many African countries, custom prohibits women from owning land. Land inheritance for women is still problematic, especially in rural communities. Frequently, women have only use rights, mediated by men, and those rights are highly precarious. Liberalization and commercialization of land for agricultural production or tourism development in most African countries also has a negative impact on women's land ownership. Indeed land transactions have changed some of the traditional mechanisms of ensuring access and use of land resources by all members of the community (Sokoni, 2007).

Accessing finances remains a challenge

- An ECA study found that although women access 10% of the micro-finance, they benefited from only 1% of total agricultural credit (ECA, 2001). Even when they access loans, women generally receive smaller loans than men, even for the same activities. There is a strong correlation between land ownership and access to credit. In Kenya, men account for 99% of agricultural credits. Without land titles as collaterals, women experience greater difficulty obtaining loans, and this further compromises women's ability to diversify their livelihoods.



Women collecting fire-wood for cooking pause on the cracked bed of the Niger River in Mali.

Women's access to agricultural extension services and agricultural inputs is low

- A study notes that 'in one village studied in Ethiopia, 52.6 % of female households learned about improved varieties from the market and 47% of male households through the extension service (Triune et al. 2001)'. Various studies note that extension services are predominantly staffed by men who direct their services to men farmers or male heads of households, and that often extension services erroneously assume that messages delivered to men farmers would trickle "across" to women. Indeed not more than 15% of the world's extension agents are women.

The gender division of labour is detrimental to rural women

- FAO reports that in SSA, women perform 80% of the work associated with rural domestic tasks, including collecting water and firewood, preparing and cooking meals, processing and storing food, and making household purchases. Poor rural women can work as many as 16 to 18 hours per day, doing fieldwork as well as handling all their domestic responsibilities. A 1999 World Bank study shows that women account for two-thirds of rural transport in sub-Saharan Africa (Blackden and Bhanu 1999). Female headed households tend to have less adult family labour at their disposal compared to male headed households.
- HIV/Aids impacted rural communities are usually composed of large numbers of orphans and vulnerable children, and many adults who are sick. 90% of the care work is undertaken by women and girls who also have to cater for labor shortage for agricultural production, thus increasing their work burden.

Access to market opportunities is limited for rural women

- Most women farmers are still compounded in subsistence and small scale farming rather than cash crop production. FAO notes that 'women farmers smallholders cultivate traditional food crops for subsistence and sale, whereas men are more likely to own medium to large commercial farms and are better able to capitalize on the expansion of agricultural tradable goods. Farms managed by women are generally characterized by low levels of mechanization and technological inputs, which often translate into low productivity' (FAO 2006).

Rural women's participation in decision making is marginal

- Women are still marginalized in the leadership of farmers organizations: for instance, the Network of Farmers and Agricultural Producers' Organizations of West Africa states that country delegations must include at least one woman representative, and the top executive committee of 10 members must include two women.
- Women's participation in local governance and land commissions remains very low. For instance in Mali, women represent only 8.3% of local councilors.
- With regard to power relations and intra-household decision making, women still suffer from lack of autonomy on key decisions regarding their agricultural production choices and the use of their income. A study conducted in Jitengi Village in Tanzania showed that 73% of men made decisions on the sale of surplus livestock against 18% for women (Mhina, 1996).

Overall, rural women's condition and status remain very low

- Service provisioning and social protection are much lower in rural areas as evidenced by: the higher maternal mortality rates; higher rates of HIV/Aids infections among women; lower education levels of rural women compared to national averages; limited electricity, energy and water supply; deficient road networks.
- Rural women's low levels of civic registration compound their ability to access social protection and services, to vote, to access land titles, to register customary marriages and to travel across the border for their trading activities or for safety in the event of climate related disasters.
- Various forms of violence against women, including harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilations, widow cleansing rites, wife inheritance and witchcraft killings are more widespread in rural areas where the preservation of social norms and culture is more acute.



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A woman carrying coffee in a traditional woven bag illustrates the International Day of Rural Women in 2008.

What will UN WOMEN do to secure rural women's rights, options and livelihoods?

Issues facing rural women go beyond agricultural production to encompass a broad range of human, social, political and economic rights. UNWOMEN will strategically partner with sister UN organizations, regional organizations, rural women's networks and development partners for coordinated and transformative action to meaningfully improve rural women's condition and status. The five pillars of the UNWOMEN's Africa programme for rural women are as follows:

Pillar 1 "African Women feed Africa"

This pillar will enhance women's role in agricultural transformation through addressing issues related to productive capacities and productive assets such as land, improved seeds and technology, access to services, value chain development and agricultural investment including credit and technology flows. It will:

- Support the setting up of rural women's agro processing plants.
- Raise the awareness of rural women's groups on government's incentives for agricultural production.
- Provide technical support for organisational development of women farmers' cooperatives to improve their management structure and their capacity to elaborate sound business plans.
- Strengthen the capacities of Ministries of agriculture to prioritize support to women food production systems in their planning and resource allocation mechanisms.
- Support rural women's advocacy platforms in relevant policy forums related to the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), the Land Policy Initiative and the Rural Futures Initiative.

Pillar 2 "African women keep agricultural markets going"

This pillar deals with rural women's empowerment in the agriculture-trade linkage, bringing strategies to better position women producers in the cash crop market, and secures their access to agricultural market opportunities at national, regional and international levels. It will:

- Support the establishment and or strengthening of rural women's agribusinesses.
- Advocate with banks to promote specific lending products for women farmers.
- Set up ICT centers for rural women to facilitate their business activities.
- Facilitate the emergence of an Africa wide rural women's platform for engaging in the policy debate on the African Common Market for Agricultural Products.
- Promote linkages between the private sector –including supermarket chains, hotels, restaurants and cosmetic companies- and women farmers' cooperatives.
- Advocate with the World Food Programme to secure markets for women producers within their programmes.

Pillar 3 "African women's agency in climate change adaptation and mitigation"

This pillar focuses on the principle that women are part of the solution in climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies, advocating for gender smart green solutions, positioning women's groups for paid ecological services, strengthening the gender analytical skills of Ministries of environment and supporting women's advocacy platforms at national, subregional and regional levels on gender sensitive climate change financing (Africa Green Fund).

Pillar 4 "African women light up Africa"

This pillar addresses rural women's access to solar energy as an adaptive technology for climate change adaptation and mitigation, and an opportunity to access jobs in the green energy sector. It includes training of rural women and young women's groups in solar technology.

Pillar 5 "Awareness raising, advocacy and reporting on rural women's condition and status"

This pillar deals with awareness raising, outreach and advocacy on rural women's issues, and reporting on progress in securing their rights and livelihoods in the framework of Beijing follow up processes, Commission on the Status of Women, CEDAW monitoring and other intergovernmental processes. It covers broad issues affecting rural women such as their participation in local governance, their right to land, social protection and civic registration, violence against rural women and awareness raising of parliamentarians on the gender dimensions of rural transformation and the rights of rural women.

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