

# Women and rural development



Enabling poor rural people to overcome poverty

When women are economically and socially empowered, they become a potent force for change. In rural areas of the developing world, women play a key role in running households and make major contributions to agricultural production. But the inequalities that exist between women and men make it difficult for women to fulfil their potential.

Women rarely have access to the resources that would make their work more productive and ease their heavy workload. Ultimately, it is not just women who are held back, but also their families, their communities and local economies.

Rural women have many roles, and they have responsibilities and knowledge that differ from those of men. As farmers, they plant, weed and harvest food crops and tend livestock. As caretakers, they look after children and relatives, prepare meals and manage the home. Many women earn extra income by working as wage labourers, producing and selling vegetables, or engaging in small-scale trading and enterprises. Added to these multiple tasks, they spend long hours fetching water and collecting firewood. In developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, women typically work 12 more hours per week than men.

In poor and marginal areas and areas affected by climate change, where



© IFAD/G.M.B. Akashi

men have been forced to migrate in search of work, women often have the sole responsibility for farming and raising the children.

Despite their many responsibilities, women have significantly less access to the resources and services they need to increase their productivity and their income and ease their burden of household duties.

Women are held back by lack of education, unequal property rights and limited control over resources. Labour intensive and time-consuming activities further hinder women's ability to improve their income-earning potential. In order for poor communities to prosper and grow, women's needs and rights must be addressed.

## Investing in women

At a time when smallholder agriculture is changing rapidly as a result of

commercialization, globalization, climate change, new technologies and migration patterns, it is important to recognize the key role women play in agriculture.

They need support to help them adapt to these changes and to seize emerging opportunities.

IFAD-supported projects demonstrate that investing in women can generate significant improvements in productivity and food security. Entire communities benefit socially and economically when women have access to land, water, education, training, financial services and strong organizations. World Bank studies show that, in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa, food production could increase by 10 to 20 per cent if women faced fewer constraints. The empowerment of women and equal opportunities for both sexes are fundamental in reducing poverty, hunger and malnutrition.

# Lightening the load in Kenya

Elizabeth Wanjiru, from the Kiambu District of central Kenya, used to spend up to six hours a day fetching water for her household of seven. The nearest spring was 2 kilometres away, queues were long and the water was filled with sediment. Now she spends just two minutes carrying clean water from the new communal water point situated about 30 metres from her home.

The IFAD-funded Central Kenya Dry Area Smallholder and Community Services Development Project, which will close in 2011, has made better access to water and health services a starting point for improving the overall well-being of women and their families.

Easing women's workloads opens up opportunities for income-generating activities. Women are able to use the extra hours to develop kitchen gardens and profitable small enterprises. Women's groups organized by the project offer training in improved farming practices. Women learn about better livestock breeds and crop species, how to prevent soil erosion and harvest rainwater. And they learn new skills such as bee-keeping, aquaculture and managing small businesses.

The project has also introduced a number of simple, cost-effective and environmentally friendly ways of improving conditions and saving time in the home, such as energy-saving stoves and biogas units that convert animal manure into gas for cooking and for heating water.

Not only are women earning more, but now that they share more equally in available resources, their social standing in the community has improved.

## Opportunities begin with education and training

Development projects do best when women's roles and needs are factored into project design from the start. The IFAD-funded Badia Rangelands Development Project operates in the central and eastern Syrian steppe. It is primarily focused on rehabilitating the badly degraded rangelands and improving incomes for the Bedouin herders who live there. But the project recognizes that broad and lasting environmental and economic improvements require better conditions, especially for women.

The project has done much to improve conditions and create job opportunities for women. Literacy classes are the foundation of this work, given that illiteracy is very high among Bedouin women. Training courses in new skills such as first aid, food processing and sewing have eased women's work in the home, and opened up income-earning opportunities.

Now that households are better off, there is less pressure on young girls to marry early. And as women gain more economic autonomy, they are finding that gender relations are shifting. Nofa Awad Al-Anad is married with five boys and lives in Shaddade, in Hassekeh Province. She trained as a seamstress and earns about SYP 500 (US\$11) a day making dresses. She no longer has to ask her husband for money if she wants something for herself or her children.

"My father used to dominate in the household," she says. "Now my husband and I consult with each other when we want to do something."



©IFAD/R. Chalesani

## FACTS

- Giving women the same access as men to agricultural resources and inputs could increase production on women's farms by 20-30 per cent, reducing the number of hungry people in the world by 100-150 million.
- Women comprise almost 50 per cent of the agricultural labour force in Eastern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa and 20 per cent in Latin America.
- In developing countries in Africa and Asia and the Pacific, women typically work 12 to 13 hours per week more than men.
- The value of men's livestock holdings is about twice that of women's.
- Men's landholdings average three times those of women. Women represent fewer than 5 per cent of agricultural landholders in North Africa and Western Asia, and an average of 15 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Women receive only 5 per cent of the extension resources of men, and are granted fewer and smaller loans.
- Many rural women spend up to four hours a day collecting fuel for household use, sometimes travelling 5 to 10 kilometres a day.
- In households headed by women, members have less education than in those headed by men in all countries.

# A little credit can go a long way

In a remote and mountainous area of the Peruvian Andes, where poverty was entrenched and opportunities few, especially for women, the Development of the Puno-Cusco Corridor Project found innovative ways to foster new enterprises and stimulate the local economy. In the process, women have learned how to obtain what they need to forge their own development.

The first step was to encourage women's financial autonomy. Over just a few years, a microfinance savings scheme encouraged more than 7,000 women to open savings accounts. Demand for this service increased when borrowers saw that savings also gave them access to credit and provided a family safety net.

The project then emphasized learning through exchange visits to stimulate fresh ways of thinking. Visiting small enterprises convinced women that they could do something similar.

Next, the project held contests to transfer public resources to local groups. To compete, women had to learn how to formulate viable business plans and express their ideas in public. Winning competitors used the funds, matched by their own, to contract a technical assistant who trained them in their chosen area: livestock, dairy, crafts or sustainable tourism. About 10,000 women have won funds to help build their enterprises.

## IFAD supports women as agents of change

IFAD has long recognized the importance of improving the well-being and prosperity of women and fostering equality between the sexes. IFAD-supported programmes and projects help women access resources and participate in decision-making, and work to ensure that women and men benefit more equally from development initiatives. There is no single formula: men's and women's roles and relationships differ according to context. Understanding and addressing these differences is an ongoing endeavour.

In more than 30 years of working in rural development, we have seen that women can be a powerful force in fighting poverty. To that end, we work to defend their land rights; improve their access to water, education, training and credit; and strengthen their leadership roles. In 2010, at the third global Farmers' Forum, we hosted a landmark meeting on rural women's leadership, bringing together women-farmer leaders from every continent.

Improving women's ability to make a profit is an essential step towards bettering their overall status. Greater autonomy and self-esteem go hand in hand with economic and social empowerment. Women have found that working together, in groups and networks, is a highly effective way of gaining access to the assets and services they need to expand their opportunities.

IFAD plays an equally important role in policy dialogue. We advocate for more investment in rural women and underline the importance of prioritizing women's needs within national agricultural programmes. This is the overall point of the 2010-2011 edition of *The State of Food and Agriculture*, subtitled *Women in Agriculture: Closing the gender gap* – a publication of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, with contributions from IFAD and the World Food Programme. The report points out that promoting gender equality and empowering women in agriculture are fundamental to achieving the Millennium Development Goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, as well as the goal of gender equality.



©IFAD/S. Becob

### Strengthening our strategic efforts

A report on our performance in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, issued by IFAD's independent Office of Evaluation in 2010, showed that more recent projects demonstrate better results. Our performance is evaluated as better than other international financial institutions and sister United Nations agencies, but we can still do better. In order to strengthen our strategic approach in the field and at headquarters, a results-based corporate policy on gender equality and women's empowerment is being developed, to be approved in 2011. Women's empowerment will also be included as one of the key themes, or 'big bets', in IFAD's corporate innovation agenda until 2015.

## CONTACTS

**Rodney Cooke**  
Director  
Policy and Technical Advisory Division  
IFAD  
Tel: +39 06 54592451  
E-mail: [ptmailbox@ifad.org](mailto:ptmailbox@ifad.org)

**Clare Bishop-Sambrook**  
Senior Technical Adviser  
Gender, Empowerment and Social Inclusion  
Policy and Technical Advisory Division  
IFAD  
Tel: +39 06 54592489  
E-mail: [c.bishopsambrook@ifad.org](mailto:c.bishopsambrook@ifad.org)

**Maria Hartl**  
Technical Adviser  
Gender and Social Equity  
Policy and Technical Advisory Division  
IFAD  
Tel: +39 06 54592455  
E-mail: [m.hartl@ifad.org](mailto:m.hartl@ifad.org)

## LINKS

**IFAD and gender**  
<http://www.ifad.org/gender/>

**Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook**  
<http://www.ifad.org/gender/pub/sourcebook/gal.pdf>

**Eldis gender guide**  
<http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/gender>

**Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and gender**  
<http://www.fao.org/gender/en/>

**International Development Research Centre on equality for girls and women**  
[http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-109370-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-109370-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)

**World Bank Gender and Development**  
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTGENDER/0,,menuPK:336874~pagePK:149018~piPK:149093~theSitePK:336868,00.html>

**Gender equality and the Millennium Development Goals**  
<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/gender.shtml>

**Women Watch, United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality**  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/>

**United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)**  
<http://www.unifem.org/>

**Women's Environment & Development Organization**  
<http://www.wedo.org/>



IFAD is an international financial institution and a specialized United Nations agency dedicated to eradicating poverty and hunger in rural areas of developing countries.

International Fund for Agricultural Development  
Via Paolo di Dono 44, 00142 Rome, Italy  
Tel: +39 06 54591  
Fax: +39 06 5043463  
E-mail: [ifad@ifad.org](mailto:ifad@ifad.org)  
[www.ifad.org](http://www.ifad.org), [www.ruralpovertyportal.org](http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org)

March 2011

# Women: A force for change in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina

After the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, as poverty forced men to go abroad in search of work, women became heads of households in about a quarter of the country's homes. But they lacked access to land, training, financing and equipment, and earning a living was difficult. Facing these obstacles, many turned to entrepreneurship.

One of them is Ljubica Rados. A struggling single mother, she had a previous career in retailing. Rados was living in an area famous for its forest vegetation, so she decided to start a business trading forest products. In 2000 she registered her company, Flores, which exports medicinal herbs and mushrooms.

After three years of fruitless attempts to find a source of credit, in 2003 Rados received a loan of US\$25,000 from IFAD's Livestock and Rural Finance Development Project. She used the funds to purchase a cooling and drying room and cover start-up costs.

The business flourished. Just three years after its initial export, the company shipped a record 400 tons of mushrooms in 2006. Flores has about 2,000 seasonal workers, most of them women.

Recently, Flores has become a guarantor for an IFAD microcredit loan for 48 strawberry farmers, half of them women. "We then purchase the products from the farmers and export the fruit to Croatia," Rados says. Providing much-needed jobs and demonstrating their determination to succeed, women like Rados have become a force for change in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



©IFAD/P. Marchetti