

Empowering women and girls is crucial to ensuring sustainable food security in the aftermath of COVID-19, say UN food agency heads ahead of International Women's Day

Hunger and famine will persist and there will be unequal recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic unless more women in rural and urban areas hold leadership positions with increased decision-making power, say the heads of the three United Nations' food agencies in the lead up to their joint International Women's Day event on 8 March.

The event, co-organised by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP), will focus global attention on the vital role that empowered female farmers, entrepreneurs and leaders need to play so that women can contribute on equal terms to the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and in creating an environment to eliminate poverty, enhance productivity, and improve food security and nutrition.

"The world is home to more than 1.1 billion girls under the age of 18, who have the potential of becoming the largest generation of female leaders, entrepreneurs and change-makers ever seen. Yet, women and girls continue to face persistent structural constraints that prevent them from fully developing their potential and hinder their efforts to improve their lives as well as their households and communities," said the Director-General of FAO. "Women and girls can play a crucial role in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and in particular in transforming our agri-food systems. We all need to work together to spark the necessary changes to empower women and girls, particularly those in rural areas," he added.

It is essential that women are not only in more leadership positions, but that they are consulted and listened to, and integrated in all spheres and stages of pandemic response and recovery said the President of IFAD. Investing in rural women's leadership and involving them more in creating our post-COVID future is critical to ensuring that their perspectives and needs are adequately considered, so that we can build back better food systems where there is equal access to nutritious food and decent livelihoods.

Women and girls make up half of our global community and it's time this was reflected in leadership positions at every level," said the Executive Director of WFP. "We know from our work around the world that when women and girls have better access to information, resources and economic opportunities, and are free to make their own decisions, hunger rates fall and nutrition improves not only for them but also their families, communities and countries."

Women's leadership is particularly important in rural areas of developing countries, where the voices of the 1.7 billion women and girls who live there are often overlooked. Sixty percent of women in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa work in agriculture - yet they have less access to resources and services than men, including land, finance, training, inputs and equipment. In addition to their agricultural work, women are overburdened with domestic chores and caring for their families - roles that have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, women are more negatively affected by the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including losing livelihoods and experiencing decreases in their personal incomes.

Ensuring that women have a greater voice is not only a matter of gender equality. Women leaders can advocate for women to have better access to and control over assets and

productive inputs, thus boosting their productivity and incomes, leading to food security and increasing their employment opportunities and real wages.

Research shows that if women farmers had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields by 20 to 30 percent and total agricultural output by 2.5 to 4 percent, lifting 100 to 150 million people out of hunger.

FAO works to strengthen rural women's engagement and leadership in agri-food systems. FAO also engages with farmers' organizations to ensure that rural women's voices are heard and promotes gender-transformative approaches to challenge unfair socio-cultural norms in rural communities. Moreover, FAO supports governments to adopt policies and strategies addressing the needs and aspirations of rural women and girls, enabling them to participate in decision-making and assume leadership positions. This also implies enhancing women's leadership skills and self-confidence and raising gender awareness within national and local institutions. Within the Organization, FAO has established a Women's Committee providing an inclusive, safe space that reflects the diverse and energetic nature of FAO's female workforce. The Organization has also created incentives for career prospects for female staff and for achieving gender parity at all levels and across all job categories.

Since 2009, IFAD has implemented a 'household methodologies' approach to reinforce the equal role and decision-making capacity of women within households, groups and communities. Evidence from Uganda, Rwanda, Kyrgyzstan and other countries has shown that women who take part in the programme take up leadership roles in their organizations and communities, and have a greater voice in decision-making in their households. This has led to greater agricultural productivity.

Food security and gender inequality are closely linked with disadvantages beginning at a young age. In many countries boys and girls have very different childhoods. Boys eat first, are given more food than their sisters, do less housework and marry later. For girls, marriage and not school work can dominate their childhoods. WFP's work in achieving gender equality begins at school where support or implementation of School Feeding programmes in more than 70 countries contributes to increased school attendance among girls. This provides them with greater access to education, reduces the risk of child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence, and increases future livelihood and leadership opportunities for girls. And better opportunities for girls mean a brighter future for all.