

African Women Speak Out For Agroecology

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Anna Rungwe, a farmer from Zimuto, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe displaying her seeds during a Good Food Festival. Photograph by Paidashe Mandivengerei.

A [2021 study by the UN's FAO](#) concludes that around a third of the world's food is produced by smallholder farmers on less than two hectares of land. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the percentage is much larger, with some 60% of the population engaged as smallholder farmers in food production and processing. At least half of these farmers are women who play a crucial role in the food chain. African women specialise in seeding, weeding, transplanting, harvesting, post-harvest work, processing, marketing and, in some areas, land preparation. They also prepare forest fruits, freshwater fish, and livestock products for consumption by their families and communities.

[Women have a special relationship with seeds as sorters, savers, and sharers.](#) Healthy seeds are the source and strength of plants and animals that are central to community food systems. In rural Africa, for as long as women farmers can remember, they, their mothers, their grandmothers and their own daughters have watched their plants grow to then choose the healthiest, best tasting individual plant's seeds to gather. These seeds will, in the coming years, reliably produce the vegetables, herbs, groundnuts, beans and grains that nurture the growth and health of their own families and communities. Through their various roles, they ensure that communities and regions are food secure, healthier, more dynamic, and able to contribute more to the country's economy.

Yet the day-to-day realities of African peasant, pastoralist and indigenous women are harsh and have become even [more constrained in the last two years with the COVID-19 pandemic](#). While their role as food producers and providers might be recognized at a high level by the African Union, the United Nations and some African governments, a large proportion of rural women experience extreme marginalisation, exclusion from decision-making, denial of essential resources such as land, water, credit, information, and technologies, and disregard for their deep knowledge of local circumstances and feasible solutions.

Faced with these enormous challenges, rural women farmers continue to show admirable tenacity as they grow nutritious foods to feed their families and communities through the use of agroecological farming practices.

Speaking up

To inform key audiences of the importance of local, agroecological and equitable food systems in times of crisis, the [African Women's Collaborative for Healthy Food Systems](#) has been working for the last 12 months with rural women in villages and communities in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Uganda, and Kenya to bring their stories to a larger audience. Partnering with local journalists, the Collaborative has supported the production of 40 hours of radio programming in local languages in Senegal and 4 articles published in national newspapers in Nigeria and Ghana. In addition, five TV channels in Kenya (TV47 Kenya, KTN News, iNooro TV, NTV Business and KBC Channel 1 News) have featured work supported by the Collaborative in Isiolo and Marsabit counties in Kenya.

These published works (radio programmes, article and videos) convey clearly the contribution and achievements of peasant and indigenous women in maintaining healthy food systems, the lack of rights and resources they face, and the actions needed to change their circumstances. Many spoke out strongly for the adoption and improvement of agroecological practices, the need for women to

have secure productive land, meaningful levels of credit to support increased production, and the right to develop and use their own local seeds.

The importance of agroecology

[Agroecology is the practice and science](#) of applying ecological concepts, knowledge, and principles to the design and management of food and agricultural systems. Agroecological approaches include diversification of crops, conservation tillage, green manures, organic compost, biological pest control, and rainwater harvesting. This helps conserve the land and environment, making it more resilient to climatic extremes and ensuring healthy and nutritious foods are available in rural and urban communities. Through the practice of agroecological farming, peasant and indigenous women are able to consistently provide nutritious, healthy foods for their families and communities, while also earning a living to support their households.

Peasant and indigenous women embrace agroecological farming practises

In the Luano region of Zambia, 65-year-old Anne Mutale started farming more than 30 years ago in a village called Luwingu. Ms. Mutale grows a variety of organic crops such as maize, cowpeas, groundnuts, beans, sweet potatoes and cassava for food and income. She stated she grows these crops because of their nutritional values and ingredients in traditional meals. She explained that her efforts contribute to safeguarding local seeds despite a lack of standard storage facilities.



Anne Mutale, a peasant woman from Luano region of Zambia holding some of her local seeds. Photograph by Maimbolwa

“I have been preserving the local seeds for planting the next season because they are healthy, unlike hybrid seeds. I normally use ash or lemons to preserve my maize, beans, groundnuts, cowpeas and pumpkin seeds for reuse the next season,” Ms Mutale explained. “I can use both fresh and dried beans, but when we want to preserve it, we have to dry it, including its leaves. For the bean leaves, you boil them a bit and add some salt before drying them in the sun. The same process is applied to cowpeas leaves. Equally, the pumpkin seeds are dried in the sun to be used for the next season. We also use the leaves as vegetables, and we dry them so we don’t run out of food in our home.”



Anne Mutale discussing with other rural women about preserving local seeds. Photograph by Maimbolwa Mulikelela

Peasant and indigenous women also practice agroecological farming by using organic farming methods to control pests and diseases without the use of agricultural chemical pesticides and fertilizers which contaminate the food. This knowledge has been passed down to them by their forefathers.

Nyengeterai Munyani, a vibrant peasant farmer in her 70s, from Zvishavane, Midlands Province, Zimbabwe, has seven hectares of land on which she grows small grain crops: millet, macia, rapoko, sorghum, and peas. She explained how she makes use of organic methods to control pests.

“I use leaves from paw paw trees, which I then crush while they are fresh and mix with water. I spray my crops with this solution and that deals with the pests and diseases. There are also indigenous trees like mutsviri and mutovhoti whose barks we burn and sprinkle the ashes on our crops.”



Nyengeterai Munyani, a peasant farmer from Zvishavane, Midlands Province, Zimbabwe displaying her seeds during a Good Food Festival. Photograph by Paidashe Mandivengerei

The adoption of agroecological farming practices by peasant and indigenous women has also united local communities by providing sharing and learning opportunities for rural women farmers.

In Shashe region of Mashava, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, Vongai Mudzingwa, a 48-year-old peasant and seed custodian explained how agroecology reduces her farming workload, improves her social life, and unites her community.

“When planting and harvesting, we call our neighbours and work together as a team. This has fostered unity among us. As women seed custodians, we use women’s seeds and agroecology farming. We are now united because we make use of mushandirapamwe,” she said.

Mushandirapamwe is a Shona word that loosely translates to working together as one, and it is a very common practice among women seed custodians in Shashe.

Vongai Mudzingwa, a peasant woman from Shashe region of Mashava, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe in her seed bank. Photograph by Paidashe Mandivengerei



“Thanks to agroecology, we even have free time on our hands. As women seed custodians, we formed a stokvel and on Thursdays, we meet and share agroecology farming ideas, exchange seeds, as well as other kitchen equipment and groceries we buy with money we get from selling our farm produce,” she said.

Peasant and indigenous women brave the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in widespread global disruptions. Although a lot has been discussed about the impact on global health and economics, little is said about the enormous impact of the pandemic on maintaining healthy food systems, particularly in local communities in developing countries. Farming, which is the only source of livelihood for many African peasant and indigenous women, was nearly impossible during the widespread global lockdown, threatening not

only the income of these farmers but also the availability of nutritious food for their families and local communities.

However, African peasant and indigenous women have braved it all and, through their courage, persistence, knowledge of agroecology and [seed banks](#), they have continued to provide healthy and nutritious foods for their families and communities.

Ndakaitei Ndoorwi, a female smallholder organic farmer in Mupata Village, Ward 22 Gutu Central, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe said that, like everywhere else, the Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected her farming activities. She recalled when she could not interact with her neighbours, share farming ideas, and exchange seeds because of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown.

“The Covid-19 pandemic had negative effects on my farming, as we were restricted to our homes all the time. We could not host events as smallholder farmers like the Good Food Festivals and seed exchange programmes, where we share farming ideas. On the other hand, this gave us more time to work in our gardens, which are in our yards at home.”



Ndakaitei Ndoorwi, a female smallholder organic farmer in Mupata Village, Ward 22 Gutu Central, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, displays her seeds at Gutu. Photograph by Paidashe Mandivengerei.

Nevertheless, she remained courageous, and with support from the women's seeds project established by the [African Women's Collaborative for Healthy Food Systems](#), she was able to surmount most of her difficulties.

“The pandemic came with several challenges, but with information on agroecology and women's seeds I got from my late grandmother, which was enhanced by the women's seeds project, I got good harvests. I also believe that by eating food from women's seeds, my health improved, and that is why I did not contract Covid-19.” Ndakaitei said.

Another female peasant farmer, Exude Mawara Munyani, from Shashe in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe said she had a heavy load of work in her field after gatherings were banned. However, with increased use of local seeds, she was elated to get surplus produce, which she sold locally and used the proceeds to pay workers.

“The Covid-19 pandemic really disrupted our farming activities. We were not allowed to gather, therefore we could not work as a community in our fields (mushandirapamwe). It was raining, weeds were growing in the fields and there was not much to do about it. This almost dampened our spirits, but we persevered and formed smaller groups of about four to five people to assist each other with field work,” she said.

Barriers confronting peasant and indigenous women

Although African peasant and indigenous women are committed to using agroecological farming principles that strengthen resilience to climatic extremes and defend native seeds, they face severe constraints in terms of access to productive resources. In telling their stories to the Collaborative, many spoke out on their lack of land rights and limited access to credit and local seeds.

In Shibuyunji district in Central Province, Zambia, several women interviewed had no control over the land they used for farming and were dependent on their spouses or relatives. With no secure use of land to make their investments worthwhile, they are less likely to apply the agroecological practises that ensure sustainable food systems and may turn to short-term solutions that produce food faster, rejecting indigenous crops in favour of new seeds that have little or no nutritional value and chemicals that are detrimental to the soil.

“We have land, but it's for my husband....it's four hectares. To use it for farming, I have to seek permission from my husband, who decides on the type of crops to grow and the proceeds from the crops we grow and sell on the property has to be declared and shared, ” said Ms. Universe Mafuta Mazaba.

Restina Mumba working on her field in Petauke district, Eastern Province, Zamb. Photograph by Maimbolwa Mulikelela.



Restina Mumba, a Petauke based peasant farmer in Zambia, also narrated how hard it has been for her to acquire land from the traditional leaders.

“I think the chiefs should help us as women not only to access land but also give us certificates for the piece of land they would offer us so that our children can also benefit. This is the time we can champion our rights. We deserve better....We want to be independent so that we can grow food that has nutritional value,” she stated.

In Uganda, many women small-scale farmers are facing growing competition for land. Nagitta Rose, a 57-year-old small-scale farmer in Bubanzi, Mityana district, was once a prominent farmer whose produce was enough to feed the community. She had hoped the land she farmed would be her children's inheritance. Unfortunately, her husband was involved in a motorcycle accident in early 2021, which has left him bedridden, unable to contribute to farming activities or protect their land. Their farm, a 5-acre with a swamp at the end, has attracted many people who want to reclaim the swamp, leading to different claims of ownership over the land. With no title deed and formal proof of ownership, Nagitta is at a loss to defend the land from encroachers.

Limited access to credit is closely linked to the lack of land rights

Most financial and credit facilities require the loan applicant to have collateral security to qualify for a loan. Since customary laws rarely allow women to share land property rights along with their husbands, and because women heads of household are often excluded from land entitlement schemes, they cannot provide the collateral required by lending institutions.

High interest rates on loans make it exceedingly difficult for smallholder farmers to pay back loans. Because of these, very few financial institutions are willing to lend to smallholder farmers. Also, a poor level of education makes it difficult for many smallholder farmers to understand and follow the lending policies and procedures of financial institutions.

Nakitto Ruth from Katosi, Mukono District, Uganda is a 64-year-old widow with grandchildren to educate and feed. Since the death of her husband in 1986, she has had to tussle it out with loan sharks over many years. She got a loan of two million Ugandan shillings (approximately US \$560) from a church-led microfinance project to invest in her poultry business to buy chicken, feed, and construction materials, using the house that her late husband left her as collateral security. She was meant to make monthly repayments over a one-year period. Unfortunately, all her chickens (broilers) died from disease. With the loan repayment period expiring, her hunt for money began. The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions in place worsened the already critical situation. The coffee seeds that she hoped would help her clear the loans faced a drop in price and buyers were scarce. With the help of her son, Ruth cleared half the loan. She hopes there'll be no more lockdowns, and that she can sell her coffee to clear the rest of the loan as soon as possible, to save her house.

Despite all this, Ruth is lucky to have collateral security. Most women lack collateral because of cultural norms and biases; this limits their potential to get credit for meaningful investments and reduces their ability to increase production and processing of healthy foods.

African peasant and indigenous women are also confronted by limited access to local seeds, poor preservation techniques due to unreliable storage facilities, and lack of standard seed banks which threaten food security in the local communities. In the absence of standard storage facilities, women peasants are forced to rely on self-made preservation techniques, which may be unsuitable, leading to loss of seeds and farm produce.

Integrating agroecology into food systems

The Collaborative is committed to promoting the rights and resources of peasant, pastoralist and indigenous women according to their expressed wishes and priorities. In response to the call for greater integration of agroecology in food production, the Collaborative has identified the following key elements of a healthy food system that rural women are creating:

- Foods are produced using ecological practices that improve the health and quality of soil, water, air and seed, and reduce the impact of climate change;
- Foods are processed, marketed and consumed that are nutritious, free of chemicals, and affordable;
- Diversification of indigenous food crops and livestock is embraced, applied and promoted;
- A non-violent environment recognizes and supports the essential role of women in healthy food systems;
- Women have rights and access to productive resources, particularly land and indigenous seeds;
- Rural women hold leadership and decision-making positions (elected and appointed).

These six principles evolved from the conceptual principles of a feminist food system that the Collaborative identified during its research into feminist agroecology during the last two years.

Support for women's agroecological farming

African peasant and indigenous women remain undeterred in their commitment to the practice of agroecology and continue to play crucial roles in maintaining healthy food systems. Rural women farmers are knowledgeable and have vast experience as practitioners in all aspects of the food system.

However, the barriers they face are enormous and they cannot surmount them on their own. They need allies to work together with them through partnerships and collaborations for a shared vision. This is important because [as the world's population continues to grow, the need for better and more quality food will be imperative](#), especially considering the various health and environmental challenges around the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that vulnerabilities and inadequacies of the global food system still persist and, under pressure, reduce food production, distribution and consumption.

Food poverty will worsen as the impacts of climate change intensify and accelerate, affecting access to affordable quality food, worsening health outcomes and reinforcing inequalities. Overall, women, children, the elderly, indigenous and disabled people face the highest levels of vulnerability to severe food insecurity and malnutrition.

Therefore, women's rights and food sovereignty organisations, along with other stakeholders, have a critical role to play in tackling discrimination in women's access to land and natural resources, and addressing gender gaps in rural education, training and finance - all essential to allow rural peasant women to increase agricultural productivity and promote sustainable farming practices. Breaking legal and cultural barriers to women's full engagement in the food system is key.

Conclusion

Healthy food systems include the health of natural resources (seed, soil, and water) and are also critical to the health of people's bodies and minds, addressing problems of malnutrition and diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart congestion. Given women's crucial role in food production and provision, the African Women's Collaborative for Healthy Food Systems is urging that women are granted productive resources to support the sustainable production of healthy foods using agroecological methods. There is an urgent need for collaboration and formation of strategic partnerships that tackle peasant and indigenous women's limited access to productive resources, and the African Women's Collaborative for Healthy Food Systems is open to such mutually beneficial collaborations and partnerships.