

Empowering Women Farmers is Key to Rural Vitality

By Laura Johnston Monchuk for the Canadian Federation of Agriculture

OTTAWA (Dec. 12, 2006) -- The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that women are responsible for half of the world's food production. Despite their contributions to the global food supply, women farmers are often undervalued and overlooked in agricultural development strategies.

"In the poorest countries, rural women produce a very large proportion of the food," said Karen Serres, a French farmer and president of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) Committee on Women in Agriculture. "Hunger and malnutrition still concern too many countries, and women farmers are right on the front line in fighting these problems. However, female farmers are largely under-represented in every continent in the world."

In Asian countries, women produce approximately 60 percent of the food; and women produce more than 80 percent of the food in Africa. In these and other regions, women are often restricted from owning or inheriting the land they use, which excludes them from accessing credit. Across the developing world, studies have shown that women find it more difficult than men to gain access to land, credit, seeds, tools, education, technology, training and basic human rights.

According to the FAO, the majority of the world's poor live in rural areas, and 70 percent of the rural poor are women whose principal resource is agriculture. A study for the International Food Policy Research Institute points out if women farmers were given equal access to resources, developing countries would see significant increases in agricultural productivity.

In Canada, rural life continues to change and women are bearing much of the responsibility of rural economic transformation, according to Prof. Belinda Leach, holder of the University of Guelph Research Chair in Rural Gender Studies. "Rural women are simultaneously dealing with disappearing social services, declining farm incomes and fewer employment and schooling options," she said. "Many hold down full-time jobs, both on and off the farm, while continuing to be the primary caregivers of children and elderly relatives."

According to the 2001 Canadian Census of Agriculture, 26 percent of Canada's 346,200 farm operators are female. Mostly, they work on two-operator farms where the other operator is male, likely a spouse. While the proportion of all Canadian farms operated exclusively by men is large -- 64 percent -- it has decreased in the last ten years. While still small, the proportion of farms operated exclusively by women has grown from 3.9 percent a decade ago, to 5 percent in 2001.

"In Canada and abroad, women are the backbone of rural communities, working diligently both on and off the farm," said Erna Ference, Alberta chicken farmer and Canadian Federation of Agriculture board member. "Rural Canadian women play multiple roles that are key to maintaining our farms, our families and our communities. It is important that rural women are also active participants in the creation of global agricultural development strategies."

Cultural barriers and limited finances, time and information often deter women from participating in recognized leadership positions, particularly in developing countries. The devaluation of women's role in agriculture also leads to unequal influence in policy-making in various regions of the world. IFAP and its member organizations have developed strategies for governments, farm organizations and rural women to help overcome obstacles to female rural leadership. Such strategies are opening doors for a growing number of rural women in developing countries to participate in producer groups and cooperative ventures and to gain better control of their economic destinies.

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“Crisis has provided us opportunity,” explained Nibia Olid, president of the Asociacion de Mujeres Rurales des Uruguay (AMRU) and vice chair of the IFAP Women’s Committee. Her organization has provided a platform for rural Uruguayan women to obtain technical training, leadership formation and small business development. More than 1,800 women from 180 groups have united through AMRU to increase their incomes and improve the quality of life of their families and communities. Marketing under the common brand, “Delicias Criollas,” these women have entered the growing organic niche market by providing all-natural homemade food products.

“Before they can represent societal interests in leadership positions, rural women on all continents must be recognized as leaders, not only by society, but also by themselves,” Serres said. “A greater participation of women in leadership positions could strengthen economies, accelerate development, and improve social programs, resulting in increased benefits for all.”

“Empowering female farmers worldwide is important to ending world hunger and enhancing the quality of life among rural populations,” said Canadian Federation of Agriculture President Bob Friesen. “As a member of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers, CFA is working alongside farm groups from other countries to help reduce poverty and empower farmers globally. Our members are well-equipped and committed to sharing expertise and knowledge with developing countries on systems and structures that provide a strong voice for their fellow farmers.”

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Optional paragraph for British Columbia and Newfoundland and Labrador to be inserted after Canadian Census information:

In British Columbia and Newfoundland and Labrador the proportion of farms run exclusively by women is twice the national share. British Columbia is the only province where combined male-and-female and exclusively female farms are more common than exclusively male farms.