

UN rural development agency invests in power and potential of women

Although rural women make up one-fifth of the global population and around 43 per cent of all agricultural workers, inequality restricts their access to land, markets or even the training and technology that could improve their lives and livelihoods, according to the United Nations agency fighting to stamp out hunger and poverty.

The Rome-based International Fund for Agricultural Development ([IFAD](#)) believes promoting gender equality is critical to reducing rural poverty and ensuring that all people have enough to eat.

“I think if poverty had a face, it would be the face of a rural woman,” IFAD’s newly-appointed vice-president Cornelia Richter told *UN News*.

“Women are producers of nutrition, and there is a lot of potential. Women are not only victims: they also bear the changes and challenges of development, and I think we in IFAD are trying to invest in the potential of women and not victimizing women.”

Overall, some three billion people – roughly 40 per cent of the planet – live in rural areas of developing countries. Although they grow the food that feeds their nations, most are living in extreme poverty.

IFAD believes investing in these people benefits all people. That’s because global challenges such as hunger, poverty, youth unemployment and forced migration, are rooted in rural areas. Therefore, investing in small-scale agriculture and rural development could have far-reaching impact.

For Ms. Richter, women are central to any effort to improve these communities.

“I can’t imagine any kind of development without women,” she stated.

Rural women and girls front and centre at UN this month

Since 1946, the UN Commission on the Status of Women ([CSW](#)) has been shaping global standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Its latest session, currently underway at UN Headquarters, focuses on the challenges facing rural women and girls.

In her [opening address](#), the head of [UN Women](#), the UN agency working to advance gender equality, challenged participants to find solutions that support this group.

“Women in rural areas need innovative technology and connectivity; infrastructure that brings sanitation, clean drinking water, energy and

transport, and that supports productivity and mobility,” UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka told delegates.

“They need access to credit, climate justice, markets and high-value agrifood chains. They need an end to discriminatory laws and norms that sustain harmful cultural practices like female genital mutilation and early and forced marriages. They need respect for sexual and reproductive health and rights. And they need an end to violence in all its forms.”

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Ms. Richter also took part in this year’s session of the Commission which dovetails with her agency’s priorities.

She said IFAD understands that “a holistic approach” is the only way to transform the lives of rural women.

“This means that we cannot only address one single topic: for example, education, or law enforcement. We have to come up with a well-designed approach where we address the different levels by which women and girls are hampered,” she explained.

Ms. Richter believes dismantling legal barriers that affect women is a good place to start.

For example, according to IFAD, poor rural people – especially women, youth, indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups – generally have weak or unprotected land tenure rights, putting them at risk of losing access to what is often their only source of security.

“We also have to make sure that we strengthen rural institutions and invest in capacity development in order to create more advocacy for rural women and girls,” Ms. Richter continued.

“And then, I think at the beginning of development is the empowerment of women. How do we empower women? Through education. And education in the 21st century can’t happen without investing in new technologies.”

A recent IFAD-supported project ensured that more 2,000 women smallholder farmers in Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda had access to modern technology.

The women received mobile phones and radios, which they used to share information on agricultural practices but also to learn about gender issues.

This is just one example of how IFAD grants and low-interest loans have reached more than 460 million people over the past four decades.

Going forward, Ms. Richter sees the UN agency expanding its field presence.

Although she joined IFAD in February, she spent more than two decades in managerial positions with German development cooperation agencies, in a career that took her to countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

“I would like to support IFAD in its very clear mandate and also provide strategic direction in a very ambitious reform agenda on which IFAD is embarking in order to achieve more efficiency in the field, which is a very clear commitment and expectation from our member States,” she said. “So, you will find more IFAD offices in the coming months and years.”