

Women Seed Change

In rural areas in the Global South, most women are farmers. They grow food for their families and communities. They strengthen their economies, conserve biodiversity, protect local ecosystems and increase resilience to climate change.

Despite these essential contributions, women's farming is largely undervalued and constrained by structural barriers. This limits women's agency and prevents them from being able to act as leaders in their communities.

Gender equality for women farmers starts with recognizing their contribution to sustainable food production and supporting their priorities.

As a model, agroecology is uniquely well suited to do this. It prioritizes local food security, ecosystem integrity, biodiversity, climate resilience, and social justice – reflecting women's needs and aspirations as farmers. It's a feminist and rights-based approach that is shaped by women and strongly connected to their knowledge and expertise.

SeedChange and our partners around the world delivered agroecology-based programming to 37,500 farmers in 2018, including 21,700 women, thanks in large part to financial support from the Government of Canada. By bringing men and women together to create sustainable livelihoods and shift the way we grow our food, we have witnessed life-changing impacts on gender roles and power structures in communities and beyond.

With Canada's continued support, more women farmers worldwide can use agroecology to lead their communities towards justice, health and sustainability.

SeedChange
Formerly USC Canada



IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH, MOST WOMEN FARM

According to the FAO, agriculture is the main livelihood for 79 per cent of economically active women in the least developed countries. Women are at the heart of food systems. They play an essential role in strengthening communities and economies, stewarding healthy ecosystems and increasing resilience to climate change.

WOMEN GROW MORE THAN FOOD

Women and men often work together in the field. Women tend to also be responsible for small livestock, poultry and less visible food production, such as kitchen gardens and non-market or "minor" crops that are important for food security. They work long hours on both paid and unpaid domestic work, take care of dependants, and are responsible for feeding their family.

Because of their focus on household food security, health and nutrition, women tend to steward a greater diversity of crops, farm animals and wild foods. In doing so, they play an essential role in conserving biodiversity and protecting ecosystem health, both of which increase climate resilience.

WOMEN FARMERS FACE SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Most women who farm in the Global South are smallholder farmers, and infringements on their rights are widespread. In many regions, patriarchal norms limit their decision-making power in the household and prevent them from participating fully in social, political and economic activities outside the home. They have less access to resources such as land and credit, and face more barriers to participation in markets. Women also have less access to training and agricultural extension services, in part since these generally focus on cash crops, which are mostly managed by men.

Women are also disproportionately affected by economic hardship and climate change. Women and girls are the first to go hungry and to suffer during extreme weather events. They have the least decision-making power and access to productive resources. Intersecting aspects of their identity, such as race, ethnic group, sexual orientation and socio-economic status, can also reinforce power imbalances and inequality, compounding women's vulnerability.

WHAT DOES EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN FARMERS LOOK LIKE?

Women in agricultural settings are empowered when they have greater access and control over resources; when they can make decisions about food production, income and time allocation; when they can occupy leadership roles in the community; and when they can take decisions to determine their own future.

The FAO estimates that if women farmers had equal access to productive resources, they could increase their yields by 20-30 per cent and reduce the number of hungry people by 12-17 per cent. Long-term benefits would be multiplied because women spend more of their income on children's needs and education than men, contributing to a stronger, healthier and better educated next generation.

For these reasons and more, SeedChange's Seeds of Survival partners find that working with women through sustainable agriculture is the best path to improving family well-being and addressing social injustice.

WHAT IS AGROECOLOGY?

Agroecology is a science and a practice at the core of the global farmer's movement for food sovereignty. It is a multi-functional, systems approach to agriculture that is community-led and that takes into account the multiple dimensions of food.

Agroecology seeks to optimize the performance and resilience of food production systems through natural processes and techniques such as crop diversification and rotation, soil and water conservation, agroforestry and animal integration.

The farmers in SeedChange's programs engage in participatory research to develop innovative agroecological techniques that enhance on-farm diversity, and strengthen their seed and food systems.

AGROECOLOGY: A VIABLE PATH FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Agroecology is the model best suited to overcoming gender barriers in agriculture. Women's knowledge of agricultural biodiversity holds a central place in agroecology. The participatory, farmer-to-farmer knowledge-sharing methodologies embedded in agroecology also help to value women's contributions to farming and biodiversity and make them visible. Together with gender equality strategies and training, women's economic initiatives based in agroecology show impressive results in strengthening women's leadership and empowerment.

WHAT CANADA CAN DO TO SUPPORT WOMEN FARMERS

1. **Strengthen** women's leadership by funding women-led farmer organizations working in smallholder agriculture, agroecology, women's rights, and rural economic development.
2. **Prioritize** women's knowledge and agency in climate resilient agriculture and climate adaptation strategies, and build on the knowledge, biodiversity and scale-out solutions developed by women.
3. **Invest** in farmer-led research and innovation on agroecology, led by women farmers, and including youth and Indigenous women.
4. **Develop** gender equity frameworks to guide policies and practices that are transformative, long term, inclusive, accessible, and address the root causes of injustice and poverty.
5. **Establish** policies and practices that enhance women's agency, decision-making power and rights over land and productive resources.
6. **Uphold** the rights of women, including political, economic and socio-cultural rights (these include the right to food, freedom from discrimination and violence, and rights to land and productive resources).

SeedChange seeks to build food sovereignty by working with partners to enhance biodiversity, promote ecological food systems, and counter inequity.

Our work helps meet 15 of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals.



SeedChange supports agroecology as a participatory and rights-based strategy that strengthens women's empowerment and leads to greater food sovereignty. Here are some ways in which our work supports women farmers.



BUILDING ON WOMEN'S KNOWLEDGE OF BIODIVERSITY

Women nurture crucial agricultural and wild biodiversity. Agroecological approaches build on women's in-depth knowledge of these complimentary food sources to contribute to food security and community development.

In **Burkina Faso**, nearly every household consumes some uncultivated plants, which women are responsible for gathering. SeedChange's partner APN Sahel recognizes that supporting communities' access to wild food sources is a good strategy to improve household nutrition, provide medicinal benefits and create market opportunities for women. By facilitating participatory assessments, APN Sahel gives women a platform to help their community identify valuable wild foods in their area and develop collective strategies for their conservation and sustainable use.

Salimata Gondé in Burkina Faso (Martin Settle/SeedChange)



IMPROVING HEALTH AND LIVELIHOODS USING ORGANIC INPUTS

Agroecology uses ecological inputs to increase agricultural productivity and manage soil health, plant diseases and pests. These organic inputs are easily available to women because they can be generated on farms at a low cost. They also reduce the use of agrochemicals, cutting down on farmers' exposure to toxic materials and improving ecosystem health.

Women in remote rural areas of **Bangladesh** have limited livelihood opportunities. To support them, SeedChange's partner organizations Samajik Kollan Songstha (SKS) and Udayankur Seba Sangstha (USS) provide training in the production of vermi-compost. Using only kitchen waste, a sheltered cement container and worms, women can improve their yields and generate income by selling excess compost. Vermi-compost replaces chemical fertilizers, reducing health risks, lowering family expenses, and protecting the environment.

Sonali Rai in Bangladesh (Kate Green/SeedChange)

SeedChange
Formerly USC Canada

Canada
PROGRAM UNDERTAKEN WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA PROVIDED THROUGH GLOBAL AFFAIRS CANADA.



INCREASING WOMEN'S ACCESS AND CONTROL OVER RESOURCES

As a practice and movement, agroecology recognizes gender inequalities in resource control. By intentionally supporting women's rights to access and control seeds, land and inputs, agroecology empowers women and helps them improve their economic well-being and independence.

For example, many women farmers in eastern **Mali** grow cowpeas and peanuts – two key crops for their families – on marginal land because their husbands use the prime land to grow millet and sorghum for market. With assistance from our partner USC Mali, women from Mopti initiated trials to grow cowpeas and peanuts alongside their husbands' millet and sorghum – an effective agroecological technique known as intercropping - thus improving women's access to more productive land. Millet and sorghum yields increased thanks to the natural ability of cowpeas and peanuts to increase nitrogen in the soil. The project also encouraged gender balance in resource control at the household level, giving women and men a way to work together to achieve complementary objectives.

Fanta Diarra in Mali (Élodie Rousselle/SeedChange)



FACILITATING WOMEN'S ACCESS TO MARKETS

Women farmers are less integrated in formal agricultural markets than men. Recognizing the value of agroecologically produced foods and adequately supporting women's marketing, entrepreneurship and cooperatives, helps mitigate these challenges.

In **Honduras**, SeedChange's partner FIPAH helped 180 women producers launch a micro-entreprise for the production of organic sesame products, including oil and nutritional bars. The project was spurred by women's need to generate income and adapt to increasingly dry conditions brought on by climate change. The women worked with FIPAH to identify sesame as a drought-resistant crop with good economic potential. They then researched different varieties, received training in agroecological production methods and developed a business plan. They are now generating their own income and improving food security and climate resilience in their region.

Sisters Delmi and Odalis Vasquez in Honduras (Darwin Carranza/FIPAH)



SUPPORTING WOMEN AS LEADERS

Agroecological approaches to rural development give women opportunities to improve their economic conditions, share their ideas in public spaces, and articulate their own solutions. In doing so, women empower themselves to participate in decision-making and influence policy.

In **Guatemala**, SeedChange's partner ASOCUCH uses a range of innovative gender equality methodologies to promote women's leadership. It supports the participation of women leaders in cooperatives, as agricultural extension workers, community facilitators and as program participants, paying special attention to the intersectional barriers faced by local Indigenous Maya women. The results are seen in women's increased ability to organize and demand equal access to land, credit and resources, as well as lead the push towards the adoption of more agroecological practices.

Herlinda Matias Ramos in Guatemala (Lise-Anne Leveillé/SeedChange)



INCREASING RESILIENCE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Women are more vulnerable to climate change, but women's knowledge of biodiversity and ecological processes helps communities adapt. By supporting women's role as skilled stewards of biodiversity and soils, agroecology helps reduce and mitigate the impacts of climate change and increases resilience.

SeedChange's partner in **Nicaragua**, FECODESA, promotes agroforestry (the integration of trees and shrubs on farms) in the Dry Corridor to improve household food security and climate resilience in the face of recurring droughts. Trees provide diverse products and improve farm microclimates by providing shade and leaf compost. They also help retain soils and increase available water. Women championed the approach early on, recognizing its benefits for their families' diet and income. Some were even able to reclaim previously unusable land by combining fruit trees and composting techniques. With women's leadership, farmer cooperatives are now seeking to further diversify fruit production and give more families access to agroforestry training.

Josefina Zambrana in Nicaragua (Blanca Castro/FECODESA)