

# **Rural women, Agriculture and Sustainable Development**

**in the Americas in the Context of COVID-19**

Position Paper



# Rural women, Agriculture and Sustainable Development in the Americas in the Context of COVID-19

## 1. The Situation

Decades after the adoption of framework agreements such as the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing Platform, 1995), the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Belem do Para Convention, 1994),<sup>1</sup> and the Inter-American Program on the Promotion of Women's Human Rights and Gender Equity and Equality (IAP, 2000),<sup>2</sup> the Americas has advanced in all areas. These achievements, however, have been heterogeneous within and between countries and have not benefited all women in the same way.

Rural - peasant, indigenous, and agricultural - women continue to face structural inequalities and socioeconomic policies that limit the recognition and full valuation of their reproductive, productive, and community work.<sup>3</sup> As a result, and although their work supports them, rural women have little chance of participation and leadership in decision-making mechanisms, in the execution of agrarian or rural development programs, and in productive systems. Furthermore, they still face important limitations in their access to financial resources, credit, markets and others, as well as health, education, justice, housing and sanitation services, among others, that undermine the full exercise of their rights in all areas.<sup>4</sup>

During the global COVID-19 emergency, rural women face the same challenges as all women - exacerbation of the care crisis, economic precariousness and increasing po-

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1 See: <http://www.oas.org/es/mesecvi/docs/BelemDoPara-ESPAÑOL.pdf>

2 See: [http://www.oas.org/es/CIM/docs/PIA\[SP\].pdf](http://www.oas.org/es/CIM/docs/PIA[SP].pdf)

3 ECLAC (2016). Equality and women's autonomy in the sustainable development agenda. <https://www.cepal.org/en/publications/40675-equality-and-womens-autonomy-sustainable-development-agenda>

4 ECLAC (2013). Santo Domingo Consensus. [https://www.cepal.org/12conferenciamujer/noticias/paginas/5/49995/PLE\\_CRM.12-Santo\\_Domingo\\_Consensus.pdf](https://www.cepal.org/12conferenciamujer/noticias/paginas/5/49995/PLE_CRM.12-Santo_Domingo_Consensus.pdf)

verty, lack of access to goods and essential services, limited mobility, and increased gender-based violence.<sup>5</sup>They also face them from rural areas that present a series of additional obstacles, including higher rates of malnutrition, the disappearance of public services along with an increase in the burden of care, the devastation of poor rural communities with the spread of COVID-19, and the disruption of the food production chain that particularly affects small-scale food producers.<sup>6</sup>

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5 CIM (2020). COVID-19 in Women's Lives: Reasons to Recognize the Differential Impacts. <http://www.oas.org/en/CIM/COVID-19.asp>

6 IFAD (2020) "COVID-19" <https://www.ifad.org/en/covid19>

## 2. The Contribution of Rural Women

Beyond representing around 50% of the formal global food production workforce, rural women occupy a predominant role in small-scale food production, the preservation of biodiversity, the recovery of agro-ecological practices and, therefore, in guaranteeing the food sovereignty and security in the Americas.<sup>7</sup>In the context of COVID-19, this role has become more important since the closing of borders and the limited mobility of people and goods has sparked a new interest in the localization of production and self-sufficiency, as well as in food security and sovereignty.

Lack of access to land remains one of the most serious problems faced by rural women. According to ECLAC, and data from FAO, about 20% of the rural population corresponds to indigenous peoples (24 million people).<sup>8</sup>Of the women who live in the countryside, only 30% own agricultural land and only 5% have access to technical assistance.<sup>9</sup>Also, more than 52% of rural women over 15 are considered economically “inactive”, which in no way means that they do not work, while rural girls and adolescents face higher risks of dropping out of school, early or forced marriage or union and child or adolescent pregnancy.<sup>10</sup>

Not owning the land they work or real estate, in most countries, affects rural women’s lack of access to credit by not having the required traditional guarantees. Furthermore, they face limitations in their access to public resources to support local producers and in access to national and international markets for their products. This leads to a vicious circle that excludes them from many productive resources or loans to finance their businesses and could negatively affect them regarding their access to emergency measures and loans in the context of COVID-19.

As in other sectors, the increase in the participation of women in family agriculture as producers, salaried or not, has not gone hand in hand with an equitable redistribution of reproductive work and care, between women, men, the State and the market. Added to rural women’s productive work is the reproductive work resulting from the sexual division of labor: feeding and caring for their families and maintaining the home and the

7 FAO (2016). Los programas de protección social con enfoque de género tienen mayor impacto en la erradicación del hambre y la pobreza. <http://www.fao.org/republica-dominicana/noticias/detail-events/en/c/386401/> (only available in Spanish)

8 ECLAC (2016), op.cit.

9 OXFAM International. How rural women are adapting to climate change in Latin America and the Caribbean. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/how-rural-women-are-adapting-climate-change-latin-america-and-caribbean>

10 FAO (2016), op.cit.

home garden.

Rural women play a central role in community mobilization on issues such as land preservation, defense of natural resources and climate change, often at the cost of their own lives. This work of community organization joins productive and reproductive work as a triple burden, which increasingly exposes women to various forms of violence and repression exercised by private agricultural and extraction companies, and by the State.

### 3. COVID-19 as an Opportunity for Rural Women

In light of its historic role in promoting and adopting international standards for the protection and guarantee of women's rights, as well as its support for OAS member states to fulfill these international commitments, the CIM reiterates the importance of the actual and potential contribution of more than 58 million rural women.

The current moment of crisis may represent an opportunity for the future to change paradigms and to build fairer societies based on a new approach to consumption and new pacts from a gender perspective:

- Investments in rural agricultural programs can help countries become more self-sufficient, mitigate the impact of severe health, environmental, or other crises, increase rural prosperity, ensure more sustainable food production systems and chains, and create increased resilience in fragile areas.
- Economic development in agriculture is two to three times more effective in reducing poverty and food insecurity than growth in other sectors. Investments in small-scale agriculture, in particular, can help revive food production and create jobs after a crisis, and enable rural communities to recover and further contribute to the recovery of urban and peri-urban areas. Since most women in the agricultural sector are small-scale producers, these investments have clear gender dimensions.
- The access of small-scale agricultural producers to local, national and international markets must also be prioritized - through orientation and training of women in essential skills, publicity campaigns on local production, priority in access to loans and other financial services and connections between women producers at the local level and national and international companies that provide access to markets.
- Reclaim the rights of rural women; to address them in their diversity, and based on this, strengthen support programs that respond to their needs as producers, as heads of their homes and as leaders of their communities.
- Empower rural women through reforms aimed at granting them the equal right to economic resources; as well as access to property, control of land and other assets, financial services, inheritance, and natural resources.

- Recognize and value rural women's paid and unpaid work in national accounts as a contribution to the economy, the environment, the fight against poverty and sustainable development. Empowering rural women is vital to eradicating hunger and poverty.
- Special attention should also be paid to the formalization of agricultural work to favor access to social protection and broaden the vision of social protection by developing interventions not only to reduce income poverty, but also to strengthen livelihoods and reduce vulnerability.



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