



## Women transforming rural areas in Northern Montenegro

- **Addressing women's economic and social contributions to society is essential for sustainable growth.** Conclusions from this policy brief underscore the **importance of strategies enhancing rural women's education, training, and job access.**
- Integrating rural women in decision-making and ensuring equal representation at all levels, along with governmental quotas, can ensure a balanced distribution of resources and opportunities for every member of the community.
- The Rural Clustering and Transformation Project highlights the imperative of **integrating rural women into decision-making processes at all levels.**
- Understanding women's workload and investing in gender-transformative programs can lessen domestic burdens, enabling wider social and economic benefits for the community.

**Montenegro**, a Balkan country in South-eastern Europe with 627,082 inhabitants, faces regional inequalities as the thriving economy in coastal and central regions does not reflect the northern mountainous area. Despite a third of Montenegro's population residing in the north, 41% of them are at risk of poverty, compared to 17% in the central regions. This disparity arises from limited access to economic opportunities, digital connectivity, social services, and low market competitiveness. However, efforts are underway to foster sustainable development in this region. More specifically, the agricultural sector, which counts 7% of the total workforce in the country[1],

plays an important role for the economy and food security of the country.

In 2019, Montenegro ranked 26th out of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII). Typically, it is rural women working in agricultural livelihoods who experience the most significant challenges. Though women make up approximately 40% of Montenegro's agricultural workforce, they account for only 8% and 13% of land and agricultural holding ownership, respectively. Despite Montenegro's progressive efforts towards gender equality, patriarchal dynamics are still present in society, restricting women's capacity for independent action or decision-making and limit their empowerment, on personal, professional, local and national scales. Time poverty, meaning little time for leisure activities outside of work, is a key factor, with women being responsible for a significantly disproportionate share of unpaid work, care-giving roles and domestic labour. Additionally, women have long been relatively absent from strategic decision making at all levels, progress towards gender equality. The reality that domestic violence is also prevalent in Montenegro further disempowers its female population. According to a 2017 survey, 43% of Montenegrin women had experienced violence during their lifetime, and 18% in the previous 12 months.

## Why is it important to invest in rural women?

It's crucial for local and national decision-makers to prioritize investment in empowering women. Evidence<sup>[2][3]</sup> shows that societies with greater gender equality enjoy higher social justice, economic growth, resilience, and a better quality of life for all members. Beyond merely granting equal access, recognizing the significance of women having equal control is key. This empowerment allows women to shape their opportunities based on their experiences, needs, and vulnerabilities, contributing to a more equitable and prosperous society. Key opportunities for growth from increased gender equality include:

- 1. Increased productivity:** Gender equality can lead to increased productivity in agriculture. Women in agriculture often work longer hours than men, yet have less access to resources such as land, credit, education and technology. When women have equal access to these resources, they can increase their productivity and contribute to the overall growth of the sector.
- 2. Improved nutrition:** Women are often responsible for farming and food production in rural areas, and improving their access to resources and training can lead to higher crop yields and more sustainable farming practices.
- 3. Poverty reduction:** Women make up a significant portion of the agricultural workforce, and so, gender equality in agriculture can lead to equitably profitable employment and reduced poverty.
- 4. Economic growth:** Gender equality can contribute to economic growth by increasing women's labour force participation, access to markets and earning potential.
- 5. Reduced gender-based violence:** Investing in initiatives that promote gender equality can help to reduce gender-based violence (GBV) in rural areas by increasing awareness of women's rights, changing negative behaviour and attitudes towards women, and providing non-violent tools for conflict resolution in the household.

The **Rural Clustering and Transformation Project (RCTP)** is implemented in Montenegro's northern mountainous area and completed in 2023. The project was financed by IFAD, its Adaptation for Smallholder Agriculture Programme (ASAP) and the national private sector and government. Aiming to empower impoverished smallholders by integrating them into inclusive, profitable, and environmentally sustainable value chains, it successfully achieved three main goals: first, it improved commercial relations between smallholders, suppliers, and buyers to stimulate investments in value chains; second, it enhanced smallholders' access to resilient water systems and roads supporting selected value chains; and third, it gradually integrated lessons from successful project approaches into national policies and practices. The feasibility study used the Objective Ranking System (ORS) to prioritize rural women's needs. RCTP demonstrated the feasibility of creating clusters, designed to bring together individual farmers or producers who may have limited resources and capacity when working in isolation and group them in specific geographic areas or sectors of agricultural production. Local private sector engagement played a pivotal role in aggregating agricultural products, and fostering pro-poor value chains, ultimately increasing the income for producers.

## What works to empower rural women? Lessons from the RCTP project

### Key message 1

**Invest in women's economic growth, including by improving access and control over resources and services; nourishing skills and knowledge; and promoting ease of access to markets and employment opportunities.**

**RCTP good practices:** In northern Montenegro, the RCTP has achieved significant progress in promoting equal opportunities for rural women and men in profitable economic activities. Women constitute 37% of cluster members, 20% of matching grant beneficiary household heads, and 18% of those who received technical and business skills training. Female farmers receive an additional ten points during project evaluation, supporting their requests for project support and ownership of pre-registered farms. Encouraging women to register as agricultural household heads resulted in 25% of the 317 newly registered household heads being women. These female-headed households represent 40% of all women benefiting from matching grants. Moreover, the project has ensured women's participation in decent work, such as in berry collection centres.

## Lessons Learned

- Economies grow when unpaid labour is reduced, and more women are financially secure[2]. With women comprising over 37% of the global rural agricultural workforce[3], investing in them will be impactful.
- Economic growth plans must include elements that create economic opportunities for rural women, through job creation, investment in education, and skills training.
- Policies and programs need to pay particular attention to creating access to the modern economy and address issues of accessibility for rural women.
- The significant presence and impact of customary norms are especially reflected in inheritance, land, and immovable property ownership; 4% of housing and 8% of land is owned by women in Montenegro[4]. Hence, non-discriminatory regulation for access and control over resources and services will promote economic independence and entrepreneurship.
- Introduce incentive measures for empowerment in the form of financial resource allocation, mentoring and professional support for women who own land and want to start or improve agricultural production.

## Key message 2

### **Amplifying women's voices, representation and decision-making.**

**RCTP good practices:** The RTCP has implemented various initiatives to enhance women's voice and representation. Firstly, women now hold 18% of leadership positions in clusters, registered by the project. Secondly, this initiative guided three key areas to create an enabling environment for women. "Women-only" meetings fostered free participation, encouraging greater presence and freedom of speech. Thirdly, women's leadership training and participation in external events, like agricultural fairs and the International Day of Rural Women, empower them with knowledge and influence. Strengthening decision-making at the household level is achieved through the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) and workshops promoting women as household heads and raising awareness of their importance to society.

## Lessons Learned

- Decision-making structures, from the household to the highest political levels, must encompass the meaningful participation of rural women.

- At local, regional and national levels, equal voice and influence in rural institutions and organizations will contribute to ensuring just access and control of assets, opportunities and benefits.
- It is necessary to offer women accessible opportunities and train them to value and express their voice. Investing in capacity building of rural women, as well as grassroots organizations will be key.
- Establishing quotas into governmental bodies and social institutions is an effective mechanism to reach equal opportunities for women and men.

## Key message 3

### **Reduce women's workload and amplify their wellbeing. With women bearing disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work, time poverty remains a central obstacle to their empowerment.**

**RCTP good practices:** Labour-saving technologies have been a crucial component in RCTP, releasing the women from the burden of labour-intensive tasks (e.g., milking and haymaking machines). Over a three-year period, out of a total of 723 approved grant applicants, the workloads of 486 (67%) and 95 (13%) women were indirectly and directly reduced, respectively[5]. The project improved basic infrastructure and services to enhance well-being, focusing on water supply and roads, with priority given to projects benefiting more women. Of the 11,293 households with better market access, 42% were female-headed. RCTP adopted an individualized approach, considering participants' daily responsibilities and schedules in organizing meetings, workshops, and trainings. Special attention was given to meeting times, locations, and themes, respecting beneficiaries' schedules beyond the project. Childcare was also foreseen for such sessions.

## Lessons Learned

- Equitable workloads are essential for sustainable development, allowing women to invest in health, education, entrepreneurship, employment, and leisure. Prioritize innovations to reduce the burden of unpaid domestic work.
- Understanding how women allocate time between economic activities and domestic care work is crucial in identifying opportunities to alleviate their burdens. Data collection and research investments will have a significant impact.
- Investment in universal childcare and the implementation of governmental and social programs with a gendered lens are necessary to respect women's time, obligations, and needs, contributing to their empowerment.

#### Key message 4

**When women can participate, engage, advocate and lead without undue limitation or fear of retaliation, women's capacity for independent action or decision-making can be fostered, and empowerment gained.**

**RCTP good practices:** To empower women throughout the project, a comprehensive action plan was developed and closely implemented by a designated staff member. Awareness-raising activities on gender-based violence aimed to reduce its influence on women's lives. Trust-building was prioritized with the RCTP team actively engaging, providing advice, and instilling confidence in participants. Partnerships ensured special attention to rural women, offering opportunities for employment, skill development, and business support.

#### Lessons learned

- Integrate women's best interests into norms, institutions, and frameworks at all levels. Harmonize frameworks with strong female representation to address gender-based discrimination and violence.
- Invest in gender transformative approaches, challenging norms and barriers at the root to empower women.
- Empower women's grassroots organizations and promote their participation in planning and policymaking, from local to national levels.

#### TESTIMONIAL



Milica from Mojkovac has an intense daily workload on her farm but admits that mowing was the hardest for her. "I cried tears of happiness when I got the mower" – the words Milica used to describe her feelings when she received a matching grant through the RCTP.

*"Before the mower, I used to pay for it. How much have I struggled, when you depend on others, their delays, and the meadow can't wait. The mower split my time needed in half. We used to mow for a month, and now in a week we take care of it all. Everything is much easier now...what I paid the others, now I leave all the money in my pocket...I don't want to work anywhere anymore; I want to be on my own. And here you see, I am a woman who keeps cattle, they are all high breed cows. I make a great living from it. Best is when you have your own peace, when everything is stable for you. Every beginning is difficult, but I would advise every person to do this, to learn how to do it."*

[1] Employment in agriculture (% of total employment) (modeled ILO estimate) - Montenegro

[2] [https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid\\_care\\_work.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf)

[3] : <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/empowerment-journalism-model-reporting-women-climate-smart-agriculture#:~:text=Over%2037%25%20of%20the%20rural,and%20fishery%20workers%20are%20women>

[4] <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/soeu-2021-2003/html?lang=en>

[5] This was measured according to the purchase of mechanization equipment (milking machines, hay collecting machine, irrigation material and equipment, mechanization for soil cultivation, etc.) that reduces the manual work of farmers. In the field assessment, we noticed an average reduce of workload between 2 to 3 hours after purchasing mechanization equipment. The direct reduction of the workload was measured through the number of female applicants who made this type of purchase, while, indirectly, there is the number of male buyers whose investments have an impact on reducing the workload of women in their household

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