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International Women’s Day 2023: Bridging the digital gender divide is essential for unleashing women’s potential in rural areas, say UN food and agriculture agencies

FAO-IFAD-WFP push to enhance rural women and girls’ digital capabilities and tackle the barriers they face to access technology to be equal contributors to our agri-food systems.

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Rome - Inclusive access to digital technologies and education is crucial to reducing gender inequalities and empowering rural women and girls – that was the message from three United Nations’ food and agriculture agencies as they marked International Women’s Day 2023.

Participants at the event, co-organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP), recognized that while digitalization on its own cannot solve all the gender-related disadvantages women face, if provided with equal access to digital technology and education, women can have a more active and effective role in our agri-food systems.

“Admittedly, it is discouraging to celebrate International Women’s Day in a time when we are going backwards on gender equality and are seeing widening gender gaps in science, technology and innovation,” said FAO Deputy Director-General Beth Bechdol. “When we invest in rural women, we invest in resilience, in the future of our communities and in creating a more inclusive and equitable world – one where no one is left behind.”

“Without increased access to digital technology and innovation, rural women and girls will continue to face barriers and socio-economic disadvantages, making it harder for them to fully participate in rural economies,” said IFAD Associate Vice-President Jyotsna Puri, Strategy and Knowledge Department. “Gender inequality and the urban-rural divide will only worsen unless we create a more inclusive and prosperous society for everyone.”

“Food security for households and communities is in the hands of the women. It is only through women’s empowerment that we can build a world where no one goes to sleep hungry,” said WFP’s Deputy Executive Director, Valerie Guarnieri. “Putting resources in the hands of women is a no-brainer and with this comes the transfer of knowledge and skills including digital literacy to help these women realize their full potential. Now that's the kind of game changer that we can all get behind.”

While there is a rapid proliferation of digital tools and services, women continue to face systemic and structural barriers in accessing and adopting new technologies. Evidence on the gender gap [indicates](#) that globally 69 percent of men are using the internet compared with 63 percent of women. Women in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) are 16 percent less likely to use mobile internet than men, and progress in reducing the mobile internet gender gap has stalled.

Recent statistics show that this contrast is even starker in rural areas. [Rural women are particularly disadvantaged](#) in terms of access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and less likely to engage with ICT solutions, due to constraints such as affordability, illiteracy, user capabilities, and discriminatory social norms.

Under the theme: [“Digit ALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality: Leveraging the transformative power of inclusive digitalization and innovation for rural women and girls](#) today's event in Rome brought together thought leaders, policy and change makers who are working on innovative solutions to bring about gender equality in rural areas and beyond. Discussions also highlighted the achievements of rural women related to digital literacy, digital skills and agripreneurship.

Event panelists included: Kusum Balsaraf, General Manager of Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal (MAVIM); Su Stephanou, founder of Green Dreams and iCow; Claudia Carbajal Morelos, Director at Precision Development; Isabelle Carboni, Insights Director, Digital Inclusion, Mobile for Development, GSMA; and Cesar Maita Azpiri, Senior Innovation Manager, Global Gender unit at IDH - The Sustainable Trade Initiative.

FAO works to promote the adoption of specific digital technologies, including in ways they specifically support women, through initiatives like the International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture, [FAO Digital Portfolio](#), [E-Agriculture Community of Practice](#), the [1000 Digital Villages](#) . The [FAO Office of Innovation](#) established the [Global Network on Digital Agriculture and Innovation Hubs](#), to support its members to foster innovation within their digital agriculture ecosystem, with a special focus on women and young agripreneurs, among other programmes.

Next month, FAO will be launching a new report entitled the Status of Women in Agri-food Systems, which will provide evidence indicating how empowering women can lift millions

of people out of food insecurity and make agri-food systems more resilient and sustainable.

IFAD is an international financial institution and a United Nations specialized agency. Based in Rome – the United Nations food and agriculture hub – IFAD invests in rural people, empowering them to reduce poverty, increase food security, improve nutrition and strengthen resilience. Since 1978, IFAD has provided more than US\$24 billion in grants and low-interest loans to fund projects in developing countries.

WFP's work on digital financial literacy helps community's upskill, enhance their livelihoods, access financial services and tools, and in the long run supports development and strengthens food security for all. For example, through its cash-based transfer programmes across the globe, WFP seeks to directly address the barriers to digital and financial services borne out of socio-cultural norms and gender-based stereotypes. By assisting women with digital and financial literacy trainings and working with community champions, WFP helps them to open their own banking, mobile money or other digital accounts, bringing economic benefits including food security to these women and, in turn, to their families and entire societies.

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