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**Gender Transformative Agroecology:  
A Rights-Based Approach to Women's Empowerment and Climate-Resilient Food Systems**

**Key words:** Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, agroecology, women's empowerment, sexual and gender-based violence, women's leadership

**Abstract:** Agroecology is increasingly recognized as an effective model for sustainable food and farming systems and women's empowerment. For transformative change, this model requires community-led responses to address harmful social norms and remove structural barriers to equitable access and control of assets within and outside the home. The "Rural Women Cultivating Change" project (2021-2027) is implemented through partnerships between agroecology and women's rights organizations in Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Canada. Together, they aim to strengthen women's empowerment and leadership, mitigate and prevent sexual and gender-based violence, and support climate-resilient agroecological practices in 62 rural communities in Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. Results from a midline evaluation show positive outcomes, demonstrating the importance of a gender-transformative approach to agroecology. Strengthening women's rights directly supports resilience building and climate adaptation. Reducing inequality in unpaid care and domestic work remains a challenge and may require strategies over a longer time frame. Overall, program strategies have contributed to community organizing and collaboration between actors at all levels towards increasingly common goals.

## 1. Introduction

Rural and Indigenous women play a crucial role in household and community food security and are stewards of agricultural biodiversity (Howard, 2003). They are central to agri-food systems, surpassing men's participation in many countries, including those in East Africa (FAO 2023). And yet, women face systemic barriers, including much lower access to resources and decision-making power, and infringements on their rights, including gender-based violence. For these reasons, women are also more vulnerable to poverty and disproportionately affected by climate change impacts (UN Women, 2023).

Implemented by nine partners in rural regions of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania, “Rural Women Cultivating Change” (RWCC) is a six year, \$15.5 million program funded primarily by Global Affairs Canada and financial contributions from SeedChange. It is aimed at shifting the attitudes and structures that limit the potential of young and adult women smallholder farmers. Actions seek to create opportunities for women “to take control of their own lives, advocate for themselves and others, and take leadership positions within their communities and beyond” (SeedChange, n.d.).

The program has three pillars: Women's empowerment and leadership, Prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and Climate-resilient food systems. These pillars are interconnected and require collaborative action. The project thus uses a “gender-transformative” approach, which is one aimed at addressing root causes of inequality. Agroecology is the program's basis for sustainable production and access to markets, given its potential to support women's empowerment, as discussed below. The framework of RWCC - to unite women's rights and agroecology organizations - is central to the implementation of the program.

This paper, written by members of the organizations involved in RWCC, provides an overview of the project at its midline point, showcasing the positive impact of a gender-transformative approach in agroecology. Evidence produced by the project's feminist evaluation methodologies shows significant improvements in women's access and decision-making over productive resources and income, and the use of agroecological investments and methods for climate-resilient production. Community awareness and action on SGBV prevention and response was also strengthened. Challenges and recommendations are also discussed to improve actions for long-term change, particularly with regard to the need to address unpaid labour burdens and strengthen survivor-centered approaches to SGBV prevention and response.

## **2. Significance and background**

### **Why a gender transformative approach to agroecology?**

Agriculture and agri-food systems are a major source of livelihoods for women, surpassing men's participation in many countries. According to the FAO (2023), 66 percent of women's employment is in agri-food systems in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 60 percent of men's. In Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, rural women contribute labour for cash crops and usually have the primary responsibility for non-cash crops and small livestock that are essential for food security (FAO, 2023; UN Women Africa, 2023a; 2023b). Women steward a diversity of crops and thus play an essential role in conserving biodiversity and protecting ecosystem health (African Biodiversity Network & Gaia Foundation, 2015).

Despite their importance in agriculture, women farmers in East Africa face systemic barriers such as lower access to resources and remuneration, while also dedicating long hours to both paid and unpaid work (FAO, 2023; UN Women Africa, 2023a; 2023b). Women have insecure land rights due to inheritance rules favouring men, and the percentages of women landowners are low (ibid.). Patriarchal norms and systemic barriers also limit rural women's leadership roles. While important laws exist against harmful traditional practices and SGBV, policies are not adequately implemented, cases are often not reported, and service providers are frequently under-equipped to respond (ibid.).

Local movements for change emphasize that addressing women's rights results in multiple benefits for women and communities. Indeed, the FAO (2023) estimates that if half of small-scale producers benefited from projects that support women's empowerment, it would increase the income of 58 million people and the resilience of 235 million people worldwide. Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) recognizes that empowering women helps families and communities. By empowerment, it means that rural women have greater access and control over resources, can make decisions about production, income, and time allocation, and occupy leadership roles (Alkire et al., 2013).

Agroecology is a science, practice, and a growing movement for sustainable agriculture (Wezel et al., 2009). Agroecology is increasingly recognized as one of the best models for sustainable agriculture (DeSchutter, 2010; FAO, 2018a; HLPE, 2019). Practices are based on local knowledge and resources, biodiversity, and the cycling of nutrients on farms (FAO, 2018b, Altieri 2018). Agroecology programs can help overcome gender barriers in agriculture due to their participatory and accessible methods. For example, agroecology does not require commercial inputs, instead building on local practices to strengthen soil health, seed security, and crop diversity - essential components for food and income generation, risk management, and climate adaptation (see, for example, Khadse, 2017).

For transformative change, agroecological methods must also be combined with measures that support women's rights and gender equity (HLPE, 2019; Kansanga et al., 2024; Bezner Kerr et al. 2019). These need to address discrimination, violence, and barriers to participation both within and outside the home. When combined with gender equality strategies, initiatives based on agroecology have shown impressive results in strengthening women's leadership and empowerment (see, for example, Humphries et al. 2012; Kansanga et al., 2024; Khadse, 2017; Oliver 2016). Women around the world are also at the forefront of agroecology movements (see Farming Matters, 2015). Deeply integrating feminist approaches and agroecology would significantly strengthen transitions towards more sustainable agriculture (Zaremba et al., 2021).

## Overview of the RWCC program

The RWCC program was developed with the goal of combining agroecology and women’s rights actions for transformative change. Partner constituencies - rural women and their communities - and local governments were consulted using participatory decision-making and risk analysis for the program’s design. Harmful gender norms, an increase in gender-based violence (as a result of conflicts and COVID-related impacts), and climatic uncertainty were identified as the main challenges. Launched in September 2022, the RWCC program is now into its second half of implementation.

The project is implemented by nine partners who combine strengths (see Table 1). In a challenging post-conflict scenario in Ethiopia, WE-Action and ISD work closely with over 200 Self-Help Groups that mobilize over 4,000 women. In Tanzania, TGNP and PELUM support women and other marginalized members of communities to fully exercise their rights to land, decision-making, and food sovereignty. In Kenya, the collaboration of SSN, GROOTS, and Hivos has led to the integration of agroecological production and marketing support with mentorship programs for women’s leadership. Coady International Institute provides support through training and accompaniment. SeedChange leads RWCC program coordination, and provides technical support and facilitation for regional collaboration.

Table 1: Organizations

Ethiopia	Women Empowerment Action (WE-Action) Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD)
Tanzania	Participatory Ecological Land Use Management Tanzania (PELUM) Tanzania Gender Networking Program (TGNP)
Kenya	Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS)

	Hivos East Africa  Seed Savers Network (SSN)
Canada	Coady International Institute  SeedChange (previously USC Canada)

The program works with young and adult rural women and men to address social and structural barriers that disenfranchise women and undermine their rights. Integrated in agroecological programming, the project provides leadership training for women, gender equality training for women and men, and entrepreneurial support and access to financial credit. The program integrates actions to bolster systems for addressing SGBV in rural communities through a survivor-centered approach.

The program uses a rights-based framework that emphasizes equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, and transparency and accountability. This approach encourages women and girls to see themselves as rights holders and to understand the obligations of state actors (duty bearers) and community leaders (responsibility holders). RWCC partners work with duty bearers and responsibility holders so that they can better understand and fulfill their roles, and thus lay the groundwork for long-term social change. RWCC also aligns with nationally-endorsed human rights frameworks.<sup>1</sup>

The project seeks to engage 26,780 diverse young and adult rural women, and 10,810 diverse young and adult rural men as direct participants in the project (SeedChange, 2021). There is particular focus on reaching women affected by overlapping forms of discrimination. This intersectional approach considers factors such as poverty, livelihood opportunities, ethnic identity, household and non-household activities, single motherhood, female heads of households, familial relations, and others.

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<sup>1</sup>Including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women (the Maputo protocol, 2003).

Ultimately, the project is expected to directly benefit 107,560 rural people from 20,838 households in 62 communities in the following regions: Nakuru (Naivasha, Njoro, Gilgil and Nakuru East Sub Counties), Kitui, Baringo (Emining, Mogotio, Baringo South and Baringo Central Sub Counties) and Laikipia counties in Kenya; Kilimanjaro (Mwanga and Same district), Manyara (Babati and Mbulu districts), and Morogoro (Gairo and Morogoro districts) in Tanzania; and North Wollo Zone, Habru and Guba Lafto Woredas in Ethiopia (SeedChange, 2021). While culturally and ecologically diverse, the communities share common economic, gender, and climatic challenges.

### **3. Methodology**

The paper has been collaboratively written by members of the organizations involved in RWCC, in order to share results broadly, as well as support critical reflection within the program. It presents key results from a midline evaluation (2021-2024) conducted in 2024 by an external consulting agency (CommonPath Consulting, Canada) working closely with RWCC partners' teams for monitoring, evaluation, and learning. The midline evaluation is cited as CPC (2024) in this document. The paper also draws extensively on project documents, such as the project implementation plan and annual narrative and operational reports.

RWCC's approach to monitoring, evaluation, and learning is guided by feminist evaluation principles that emphasize qualitative, inclusive, and participatory methods in which the process of data collection and analysis is itself empowering for participants and directly useful to support actions for social change (SeedChange, 2021; CPC, 2024). Methods favoured by partner WROs have been prioritized, including key information interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory research and analysis. Qualitative data collection in the form of storytelling and focus group discussions have been important, complemented by the quantitative data collection conducted for the baseline.

The ultimate outcome of the RWCC program is “enhanced gender equality and empowerment of young and adult rural women in all their diversity in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania.” This

ultimate outcome is measured with indicators linked to three indexes, each reflecting one of the three pillars of the program. Each pillar also has intermediate outcomes with measurement tools, including the project's "Participant-Defined Women's Public Leadership Index" (CPC, 2024).

The midline evaluation (MLE) collected both qualitative and quantitative data to measure both ultimate and intermediate outcomes. Methods included: a household survey (stratified sample of participants), key informant interviews, and focus group discussions (using purposive sampling to maximize diversity). The survey was carried out with a total of 858 women and 497 men, with 432 people participating in the KIIs and FDGs (CPC, 2024).

In addition to standard ethical research guidelines, the MLE used a trauma-informed and survivor-centered approach based on awareness and sensitivity (CPC, 2024, p.13). In preparing and carrying out the key interview and focus group discussions, and for data analysis, the MLE methodology encouraged the recognition of intersectionality and power dynamics, the positionality and bias of evaluators, subjectivity and multiple forms of knowledge, and the encouragement of care (CPC, 2024).

## **4. Results and discussion**

### **Pillar 1: Enhancing Women's Empowerment and Leadership**

Program approach for pillar 1

Strategies to enhance women's empowerment and leadership in agroecology movements draw from proven methods by RWCC partners. Participatory assessments, such as mapping for policy influence opportunities, have been important in early stages. Training on women's rights, gender equality, and climate resilience is ongoing, as are leadership learning exchanges and mentorship. In Kenya, for example, the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) supports participants in visualizing their goals and making action plans for gender-transformative change to enhance their livelihoods and other aspects of their lives. Community champions are supported to implement plans, monitor and share results, and provide training to others.

Awareness campaigns, community forums, and multi-stakeholder dialogues have been organized across the three countries to support collaborative action for women’s empowerment in agri-food systems. RWCC partners support organizing on the three pillars, including facilitating women’s participation in policy processes on women’s rights, farmers’ rights, climate change, and public budgeting. In Tanzania, for instance, Intensive Movement Building Cycle (IMBC) involves participatory action research and the creation of community “knowledge centres,” media training, and sharing of recommendations with the government. A complementary approach, Coady Institute’s ABCD methodology, has been integrated to map community resources and to leverage resources.

Household dynamics and unequal care work are a focus of awareness-raising. In Ethiopia, for example, a masculinity transformative approach includes a number of integrated activities such as male involvement in the Community Action Groups to unpack harmful social norms and address SGBV incidents and causes, and family gender analysis workshops. Frequent interactions between Self-Help Group members and male family members of all generations are organized to help reinforce positive roles men play to support women’s leadership in agroecology.

### Results under pillar 1

According to the project’s Women’s Empowerment Index<sup>2</sup>, the total score increased significantly across all three country contexts (Ethiopia: 6.1 to 8.0; Kenya: 5.4 to 6.6; Tanzania: 5.7 to 6.6) (CPC, 2024). There were important improvements in women’s ownership of productive (agroecological) assets and access to equitable loan sources, as well as on decision-making on productive resources such as agricultural inputs and the sale of agricultural products (CPC, 2024, p. 19). As noted by the MLE report (CPC, 2024, p. 44-45): “The strengthening of women’s leadership in the agricultural sector has enhanced their self confidence and agency, and women have experienced the transformative influence of their agency and autonomy in decision-making.”

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<sup>2</sup> The index was an adaptation of the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index. It examines: resources (ownership of productive assets, access to equitable loan sources), production (decision-making on productive assets and sales), income (control over income on productive assets), and time (balance of time spent on productive and reproductive labour).

Time was the only dimension of the project's Women's Empowerment Index that saw no significant change according to the MLE. An increase in agricultural work is sometimes observed within women's economic empowerment initiatives (Johnston et al. 2018). A challenge identified by the MLE is that women are not seeing a reduction in time burdens, particularly for non-remunerated tasks. Addressing this problem requires the use of strategies over a long time frame. Efforts are underway to further understand and intervene appropriately to influence equality, particularly through male engagement activities, community dialogues, labour saving tools and supports, and gender equality training.

In terms of public leadership, results indicate that women have greater confidence and ability to advocate for themselves and others. Nearly 80% of respondents in Ethiopia and Tanzania indicated they agreed that the RWCC training had increased their leadership and decision-making ability, with 55% agreeing in Kenya (CPC, 2024, p. 29). Over 97% of women in Ethiopia, 91% in Kenya, and 98% in Tanzania reported increased confidence to participate in climate policy forums (CPC, 2024, p. 31). Rural women are increasingly at the forefront of budget advocacy, such as in Kenya to increase the allocation of resources at national and county levels for SGBV response services (Hivos, Groots and SSN, 2024), or redirect subsidies away from synthetic fertilizers toward agroecological ones (SeedChange, 2023, p. 13).

To date, 2,227 women have occupied various leadership positions as a result of the project's interventions (SeedChange, 2024a, p. 6). Community leaders have acknowledged the role the project has played in encouraging women's leadership. As one male leader in Ethiopia remarked, "There is no organization working like yours... to advocate that women could be presidents, to speak out loud about their rights, to not be dominated by men's ideas."

Multi-stakeholder engagement processes with duty bearers have brought to light the gaps and opportunities that could be leveraged for women's benefit within government systems across all three countries. RWCC partners have facilitated duty bearer and citizen dialogues at various levels, which have led to increased levels of commitment and accountability. Participants from 192 institutions (government, private sector, civil society organizations, financial institutions, and others) have acquired knowledge to implement gender-responsive action plans such as seed security and agroecology action plans (SeedChange, 2024a, p. 6).

In Ethiopia, for example, advocacy training, learning exchanges and community consultation forums helped establish bonds among community members, local leaders, field agents and government agencies. Women shared stories that helped increase understanding of gender issues and constraints in institutional and public policy decision-making. The exchanges also enhanced women's leadership skills to manage groups and advocate for their rights to participate in agricultural and socio-economic activities. As one woman expressed: "We had a high level of fear of speaking in front of audiences and we did not engage in discussions. . . My fear is gone and replaced by equality with my husband." (CPC, 2024, p. 27-28).

## **Pillar 2: Addressing SGBV Prevention and Response**

### Program approach for pillar 2

Partners have supported participatory assessments and mapping of SGBV services and gaps with communities, duty-bearers, civil society, and service providers. This is linked to the creation of community advocacy and action plans on SGBV public services. Through these methodologies, public officials have engaged in dialogue with women from the project areas who explained challenges with service delivery and what needs to change. Partners also provide referral linkage guidelines for SGBV survivors with legal and health service providers.

Training on survivor-centered approaches is carried out with religious and cultural leaders, local institutions, health and legal response service providers (police, health workers, judicial employees), and decision makers at all levels. In Kenya, for instance, local service providers participated in community elders' workshops on SGBV to gain greater awareness and practical tools. In Tanzania, training is provided in a participatory manner involving farmer groups, traditional leaders, religious leaders, committees for the National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children (NPA-VAWC), duty bearers and others.

In Ethiopia, in order to increase the capacity of SGBV responders to prevent, identify, refer and manage cases, quarterly consultation forums with leaders from legal, medical, and CBOs have been convened. Community Action Groups (CAGs) were established as watchdogs to monitor and report cases. Collaboration was strengthened among stakeholders and integrated strategies were developed for addressing SGBV in the community, especially in the context of conflict.

Awareness-raising campaigns take place in all three countries and involve working closely with the media. Journalists were trained to raise awareness around SGBV, including systemic deficiencies in response services. In Tanzania, for example, gender transformative training with the media focused on challenging negative social norms and raising awareness and reporting on SGBV.

## Results under pillar 2

The second index of the ultimate outcome is a national score on SGBV examining community awareness (prevention and response, services, and reporting mechanisms) and willingness to report cases. The total score increased significantly in Ethiopia and Tanzania according to the MLE. Among the highlights, the percentage of young women in Tanzania who indicated they would report a case of gender-based violence increased from 48% at baseline to 87% at midline (CPC, 2024, p.23). In Kenya, MLE quantitative measurements showed few changes compared to the baseline or decreased rates, but qualitative measures validated partner observations of knowledge and attitude changes among participants regarding SGBV in their communities.

Progress has been made on awareness and prevention of SGBV. Structures such as knowledge centres, male champions, agroecology groups, self-help groups and community action groups set up by the project are being recognized and integrated into the general governance for SGBV prevention and mitigation (SeedChange, 2024a, p.6). Representatives of these structures in Kenya and Tanzania have been integrated into public processes to provide advice to duty bearers. Awareness-raising in the communities has also created demand on duty bearers for greater accountability (ibid.).

In Tanzania, for example, community SGBV champions were trained to conduct awareness meetings on SGBV prevention and response, working closely with local governments. Key topics included identifying cases, understanding referral pathways, survivor-centered support for survivors, and promoting community accountability. Since the training, there have been notable changes in community attitudes, with increased engagement from men and growing collective support for survivors (SeedChange, 2024a, p.21). Many women are being increasingly recognized for their leadership as SGBV champions as well as in agroecology, due to increased confidence to act (SeedChange, 2024c). Activities focused on agroecological production and income opportunities are also used as spaces to raise awareness on SGBV (CPC, 2024, p. 39).

According to the MLE, community-level interventions appear to have contributed to increased awareness of SGBV prevention and response mechanisms. Increased understanding of the issues and gaps may have enabled people to act more effectively. For example, in Maherri village, Tanzania, women collectively and successfully fought for justice when one of their residents reported an assault (SeedChange, 2024a, p.6). However, there is limited awareness by institutional duty bearers on the survivor-centered approach, indicating the need for more attention to advocacy on this issue (CPC, 2024, p. 44-45). Midline data also reveals differing levels of satisfaction among female respondents regarding their community's efforts in SGBV prevention and response, indicating a range of experiences across the project's areas.

### **Pillar 3: Strengthening Climate Resilient Food Systems**

Program approach for pillar 3

The program's training and material support for agroecological production includes crop and animal diversification (including agroforestry and vegetable gardens), sustainably-intensive cropping systems, and production of agroecological inputs for soil fertility and pest control. Partners support the development of women's agroecology groups, demonstration farms and farmer field schools, and organize dialogues with agricultural service providers, food and seed fairs, and others. Value addition and collective marketing is supported for diverse products. Community microfinance groups were established to help address women's access to credit.

In Kenya, for example, SSN builds on experience in farmer-to-farmer training via community seed bank “ambassadors” and climate champions who are promoting women’s rights and building a movement for agroecology and farmers’ seed systems. Hivos and GROOTS have adapted SSN methods, such as biodiverse vertical gardens, into their women’s leadership programs and networks. Working together, Kenyan partners have also established farmer field schools with more than 2,000 farmers for collective learning.

SeedChange’s methodology for a Seed Security Assessment and Action Plan (SSAAP) was built into the program (see Shrestha, 2020). Carried out in the three countries, it has guided actions to improve seed diversity, production, access, availability, choice and quality, such as through participatory varietal selection. The SSAAP brought greater visibility to women’s knowledge and enriched existing assessment methods used by partners, such as the “Diversity Wheel” to identify crops to protect. In Ethiopia, ISD-supported Self-Help Groups help ensure such farmer knowledge informs activities for seed security.

In terms of marketing, RWCC partners facilitate participatory and gender responsive market research and training, skills development to women’s collective enterprises, supportive structures such as collection centres, farmer and market actors dialogues, start-up capital, and finance linkage support to women-led enterprises. In Kenya, SSN established a produce aggregation and vegetable dehydration centre in an area where farmers experience post-harvest losses.

Partners facilitate the mapping of women’s access to resources, community dialogues on women’s land and resource rights, support women’s access to resources, and organize multi-stakeholder dialogues on women’s and farmers’ rights. In Tanzania, for example, PELUM promotes women’s land rights using methods such as working with community leaders and other responsibility holders to issue Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy (CCRO) to rural women in the villages (SeedChange, 2024a, p. 30).

### Results under pillar 3

The final index for the ultimate outcome measures the use of agroecological inputs and methods, which improved significantly according to the midline evaluation: Ethiopia: 5.9 to 7.6; Kenya: 4.7 to 5.5; Tanzania: 2.9 to 5.6. Changes included increased use of: farm-saved seeds, locally-adapted varieties, organic soil amendments (animal manure, composting, organic fertilizers, green manure), vertical gardening (planting in space), crop diversification, crop rotation, and mixed and inter cropping. These measures were associated with a decreased use of non-agroecological inputs and expenses, such as external seeds, synthetic fertilizers, and herbicides.

The program's approach to supporting women's decision making over household income was particularly important for improving women's financial autonomy and agency (CPC, 2024). Women in Kenya reported greater self-sufficiency due to increased yields and income, supported by financial and market training, according to the MLE. In Ethiopia, the percentage of women with decision-making control over household income rose from 73% to 95%. In Kenya, this indicator increased from 70% to 82%, and in Tanzania, from 70% to 83%. As noted by a female FGD participant in Amhara region, "Almost all of us stayed at home before the project, but currently we are engaging in income activities, mainly agroecology-related activities [...] and we are using our land for vegetable production" (CPC, 2024, p. 37).

Agroecological practices and community organizing are contributing to improved resilience to climate change impacts (SeedChange, 2024a). In Ethiopia, for example, composting boosted soil fertility and resistance to erosion, while farm diversification and income-generating activities (such as poultry and vegetable and seedling production) strengthened household strategies. As one participant explained, "I am fulfilling my family's livelihood and nutrition, and can cope with the loss of farm produce which might happen." Events such as seed fairs also highlight women's expertise in agrobiodiversity and conservation of local varieties which are crucial for climate adaptation.

Training on women's leadership, combined with production and income opportunities, have strengthened women's individual and collective abilities to advocate for their rights and for

agroecological solutions. For example, Kenyan partners are working with the Nakuru county government to develop an agroecology strategy that brings together efforts in agroecological production and marketing with women-led organizing and advocacy to prevent gender-based violence related to land use. Across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania, there is a noticeable improvement in women's ownership of productive assets and access to equitable loans (SeedChange, 2024a). In Tanzania, 421 women acquired Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy in 2024 (SeedChange, 2024a, p. 30).

Testimonies from participants provide powerful confirmation of these observations. One participant from Morogoro shared: "Agroecology has given me real economic power. I now have enough food to feed my family and sell the surplus, allowing me to earn money for other expenses. This financial independence has empowered me to challenge restrictive norms and gain more control over my life." A woman from Masenge village in Tanzania similarly explained: "I am now aware of my land rights. Before I thought married women's rights over land are attached to her husband, of which when the husband dies the land goes to his relatives. We lived in that tradition and thought it was normal for us as women until PELUM came and gave us a light. We are now aware of our land rights."

### **A systemic and holistic approach**

The MLE concluded that the RWCC project - across its three pillars - is perceived by participants to be relevant and timely, addressing local needs and priorities. As summed up by a woman farmer in a focus group discussion in Tanzania: "Training on agroecology methods for climate-resilient agriculture, women empowerment, and fighting the SGBV all were long overdue, and we are glad to have been part of the project." A duty bearer from the justice system in Amhara Region, Ethiopia, also explained: "The timing of this project is perfect. The period following the war was crucial due to the conflict's destructive effects on the economy, politics, and other areas [...] with regard to empowering women in the training where financial support and delivery were crucial." (CPC, 2024, page 17).

Actions under each pillar reinforce each other in a holistic manner. As noted in the strategies described above, actions under each pillar necessarily overlap. For example, agroecology activities are carried out in combination with methods to promote women’s confidence, leadership and rights to resources. Agroecological production helps strengthen women’s income, as well as diversify farms, which translates into greater economic and ecological resilience when faced with climatic uncertainty. As a participant in Goshweha (02) Kebele of Habru woreda, Ethiopia, explained:

“The project has improved my family's livelihood by increasing my sources of income. In addition, our homestead and field farm land’s soil fertility is increasing, which will provide us with increased productivity of crops. I started to have assets. I am participating in savings in my Self-Help Group. I have an understanding of agroecological production methods and use the methods in my homestead and farm land. I am sharing my experience with the community. All this helped me to improve my engagement in decision-making at the household level and participation in community groups, including taking on leadership roles. In general, my family can cope with the loss of farm produce, which might happen due to the irregular rainfall and pests. I built confidence and exercised a leadership role in my area.” (SeedChange, 2024b, translated)

The program’s emphasis on multi-stakeholder collaboration and awareness-raising is an important overall impact of the project, which may help ensure lasting and systemic impacts. The MLE noted various instances of meetings and platforms where community members could discuss together and interact with decision-makers, leading to stronger understanding, accountability, and joint actions. As noted by a young man in a focus group in Kitui, Kenya: “The meetings held by RWCC have brought community cohesion and togetherness through sharing of people’s ideas, which has brought tolerance and transparency in decision-making” (CPC, 2024, p. 40).

Through leadership training and accompaniment provided by RWCC partners, women have been actively supported to participate in policy forums related to the three pillars. Further, to enhance *institutional* support for gender equity in agricultural and development policy processes, RWCC

partners and women leaders are engaged in a number of initiatives to influence legislative processes that support women's rights to participate. These include, for example, in Tanzania, the Committees on Violence Against Women and Children as part of the National Plan of Action.

Partners are engaged in advocacy to promote an enabling environment for a three-pillar approach. For example, in Ethiopia, RWCC partners' advocacy is focused on promoting: 1) Recognition of women as farmers who actively participate in agroecological decision-making; 2) Ensuring that women can live free from gender-based violence; and 3) The implementation of gender provisions within agricultural policies and extension systems (ISD and WE-A, 2024). National agroecology strategies in the three countries<sup>3</sup> now provide an opportunity to support a growing momentum in support of agroecology and also to influence programs and policies towards a gender-transformative and rights-based approach. For example, in Tanzania, PELUM is the lead coordinator on the National Ecological Organic Agriculture Strategy, bringing gender analysis to the forefront. In Kenya, partners are leading a multi-stakeholder pilot program for gender-transformative agroecology training with extension practitioners and farmer champions to further support the agroecology strategy.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, the midline evaluation observed significant progress towards the project's ultimate outcome across all three countries. As noted in the report: "With some variance in results across countries, the RWCC has demonstrated that its approach to empowering young and adult women, preventing and addressing SGBV, and increasing climate resilience has indeed contributed to exceptional progress in the achievement of results" (CPC, 2024, p.44). Among its recommendations, the MLE discussed further exploring women's reproductive labour burden and how this can be alleviated through male engagement activities. The MLE also indicated the need to strengthen advocacy plans with duty bearers to support the adoption of a survivor-centred approach to addressing SGBV prevention and response.

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<sup>3</sup> The National Agroecology for Food System Transformation (2024-2033) in Kenya, the National Agroecological and Organic Agricultural Strategy (NEOAS, 2023-2030) in Tanzania, and the National Organic Agriculture Platform in Ethiopia.

This study confirms the importance of a gender-transformative approach to agroecology. Actions under each pillar reinforce each other in a holistic manner. Women's empowerment and leadership provides the basis for collective action. SGBV prevention and response helps reduce injustices and address a major barrier to women's participation in productive and leadership activities. Linking local champions with service providers helps ensure actions are grounded. Finally, rights based actions to strengthen food systems improve income, autonomy, and rights for women while contributing to more food-secure households and communities. Overall, addressing women's rights directly supports resilience-building and climate adaptation. Importantly, holistic and participatory program strategies contribute to community cohesion and collaboration between all actors at local and national levels towards increasingly common goals.

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