

 SeedChange
A woman in a pink sweater and blue floral skirt stands in a lush garden, holding a bunch of green leafy vegetables. The garden features raised beds with white fabric, a trellis with red flowers, and various green plants. The background shows a wooden bench and more greenery.

Rural Women Cultivating Change:

A Gender Transformative Approach to Agroecology

Emerging lessons from project midline findings

MARCH 2025

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Cover Image: Hannah Wanjugu harvests spinach from her Spring Garden at her homestead in Gema, Nakuru County, Kenya, 2022.

*Unless otherwise stated, quotes in the text are drawn from the RWCC Midline Evaluation Report (2024) submitted to SeedChange by Common Path Consulting (Canada). **The full report can be viewed by scanning the QR code at the bottom of this page.***

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Note:

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INTRODUCTION:

A Gender Transformative Approach to Climate-Resilient Food Systems

Women are at the heart of food security and biodiversity protection. However, they face systemic barriers, including limited access to resources, restricted decision-making power, and violations of their rights, such as gender-based violence. As a result, women are more vulnerable to poverty and disproportionately affected by climate change.

Implemented in rural regions of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania, the Rural Women Cultivating Change (RWCC) project is helping to shift the attitudes, processes, and structures that limit the potential of young and adult women smallholder farmers. Project actions create opportunities for women to control their own lives, advocate for themselves and others, and assume leadership positions in their communities and local food systems.

RWCC is built on three interconnected pillars that require collaborative action:

- Women's empowerment and leadership
- Prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)
- Climate-resilient food systems

Agroecology - recognized as an effective model to help overcome gender barriers in agriculture - is the project's basis for sustainable production and market access. By uniting women's rights and agroecology organizations, RWCC addresses the root causes of inequality in a unique and powerful way.

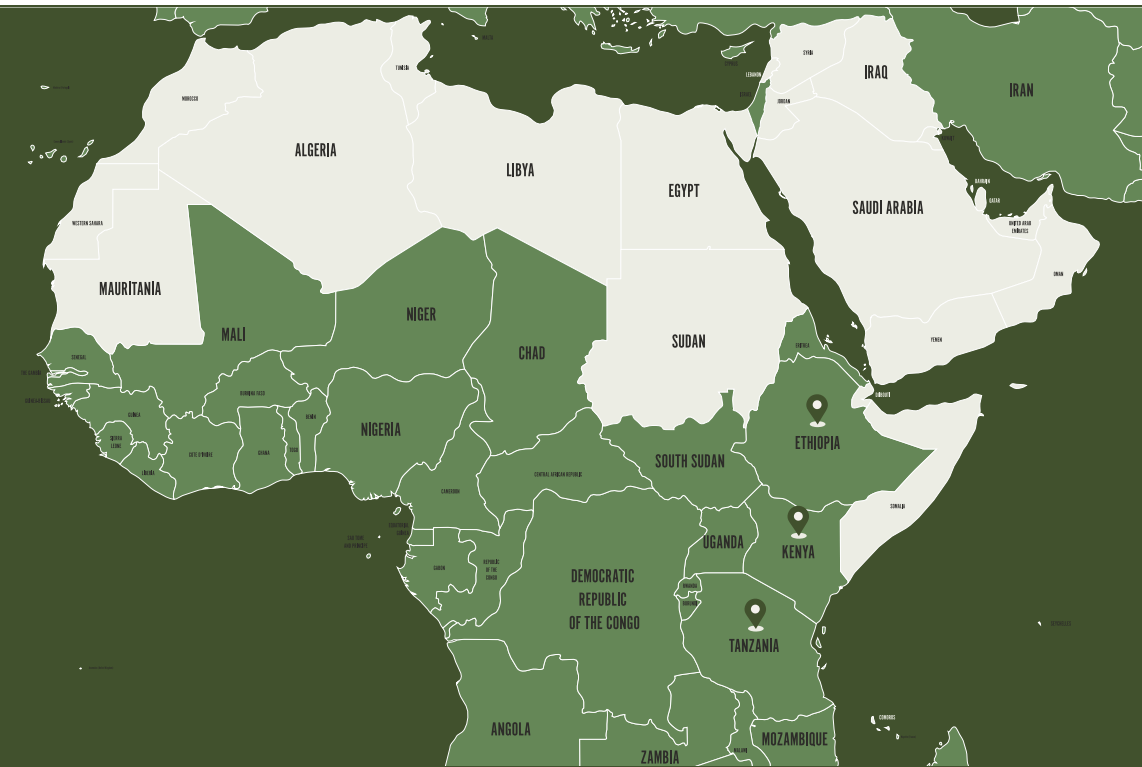
This publication provides an overview of RWCC at its midline point, showcasing the positive impact of gender transformative agroecology for women's empowerment and resilient food systems. It presents key findings from a midline evaluation, based on qualitative and quantitative data collected in participating communities.

The unique framework of RWCC - uniting women's rights and agroecology organizations - is proving crucial to help address root causes of inequality.

Evidence shows improved women's access to resources and income, increased community action on SGBV prevention, and greater adoption of climate-resilient agroecology. The report also highlights ongoing challenges and recommendations for further change.

Our Partnerships

Rural Women Cultivating Change (RWCC) is a six-year, \$15.5 million project funded primarily by Global Affairs Canada and financial contributions from SeedChange. Launched in September 2022, the RWCC project is now into its second half of implementation. The project is implemented by nine partners that bring expertise in women’s rights work and agroecology. SeedChange coordinates the project and provides technical support while facilitating regional collaboration.



The project will engage 26,780 diverse young and adult rural women, and 10,810 diverse young and adult rural men as direct participants. Ultimately, the project will directly benefit 107,560 rural people from 20,838 households in 62 communities.

A Rights-Based Approach

The project uses a rights-based framework that 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 fulfill their roles, and thus lay the groundwork for long-term change.

RWCC aligns with nationally-endorsed human rights frameworks and, more specifically, pays attention to:

- Women's rights to participation and leadership in decision-making at all levels;
- Women's rights to live free from any forms of sexual and gender-based violence;
- Women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion;
- Women's rights to secure land tenure, as well as access and control over other natural and productive resources; and
- Women's rights and access to services, markets, equitable working conditions, and equal control over income and benefits.

RWCC aims to reach women affected by overlapping forms of discrimination. This intersectional approach considers factors such as poverty, livelihood opportunities, ethnic identity, single motherhood, and female-headed households, among others.

Why Gender Transformative Agroecology?

Agriculture and agri-food systems are a major source of livelihoods for women, surpassing men's participation in sub-Saharan Africa.¹ In Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania, women contribute labour for cash crops and usually have the primary responsibility for non-cash crops and small livestock essential for food security. As stewards of diverse crops, they play a critical role in protecting biodiversity and ecosystem health.

Despite their vital contributions, women farmers in East Africa face systemic barriers, including limited access to resources and insecure land rights due to inheritance rules favouring men. Long hours dedicated to both paid and unpaid work, patriarchal norms, and SGBV also limit rural women's leadership roles in communities and local food systems. While legal protections exist against harmful traditional practices and SGBV, cases are often not reported and service providers are frequently under-equipped to respond.

Local movements for change emphasize that addressing women's rights results in multiple benefits for all.

Indeed, the FAO (2023) estimates that if half of small-scale producers benefited from projects that support women's empowerment, it would increase the resilience of 235 million people worldwide. Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy 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.²

Agroecology offers a pathway to overcoming gender barriers in agriculture, when paired with a gender transformative approach. Agroecology practices are rooted in local knowledge and methods that strengthen soil health and crop diversity - key for food production, income generation, risk management, and climate adaptation.³ For real change, RWCC's midline evaluation findings and leading agroecology experts affirm that agroecological methods must be combined with measures that support women's rights and gender equity.⁴

¹ FAO. (2023). The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems. Food and Agriculture Organization, Rome.

² Alkire, S., Meinzen-Dick, R., Peterman, A., Quisumbing, A., Seymour, G., Vaz, A. (2013). The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index. *World Development* (52), pages 71-91.

³ FAO. (2018). The 10 Elements of Agroecology: Guiding the Transition to Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems. Food and Agriculture Organization, Rome.

⁴ HLPE. (2019). Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome.

A gender transformative approach seeks to transform unequal power relations by identifying intersectional forms of discrimination or oppression, and challenging the inequities in labour burdens and access to and control over resources or assets. The approach aims to strengthen women's and girls' agency and decision-making power, engage men and boys as allies, and engage with multiple actors at all levels of governance for social change.⁵ For lasting change, agroecology must therefore be paired with measures that address discrimination, violence, and barriers to participation, both within and beyond the household.

When combined with gender-based analysis and equality strategies, initiatives based on agroecology have shown impressive results in strengthening women's leadership. Women around the world are also at the forefront of agroecology movements, and their knowledge and leadership are crucial. Integrating feminist approaches and agroecology would significantly strengthen transitions toward more sustainable agriculture.⁶ For these reasons, and more, working with women and men through gender transformative agroecology is a powerful path toward women's empowerment and strengthened food system resilience.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The foundations of our approach:

1. Valuing women's knowledge, priorities, and contributions.
2. Ensuring women's rights to resources, services, and land.
3. Strengthening women's leadership, advocacy, and organizing.
4. Promoting gender equality by addressing harmful norms.
5. Advancing women's roles in agroecology and fair markets.
6. Preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence.

⁵ FAO. (n.d.). Joint Programme on Gender Transformative Approaches for Food Security and Nutrition, <https://www.fao.org/joint-projectme-gender-transformative-approaches/overview/gender-transformative-approaches/en>.

⁶ Zaremba, H., Elias, M., Rietveld, A., & Bergamini, N. (2021). Toward a Feminist Agroecology. *Sustainability*, 13(20), 11244-.

Measuring Impact

The ultimate outcome of the RWCC project is enhanced gender equality and empowerment of young and adult rural women in all their diversity in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania. This outcome is measured with indexes that compile indicators reflecting each pillar of the project and the gender transformative agroecological approach adopted.

“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.”

WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

- More women **own and share control over productive assets** like land.
- More women **access equitable credit** and have **improved control over income**.
- Women feel more confident to **take leadership** and **advocate in their communities**.

SGBV PREVENTION & RESPONSE

- People are **more aware of SGBV response and prevention efforts** in their communities.
- Frontline government workers are **better equipped to support survivors**, thanks to community engagement.

CLIMATE-RESILIENT FOOD SYSTEMS

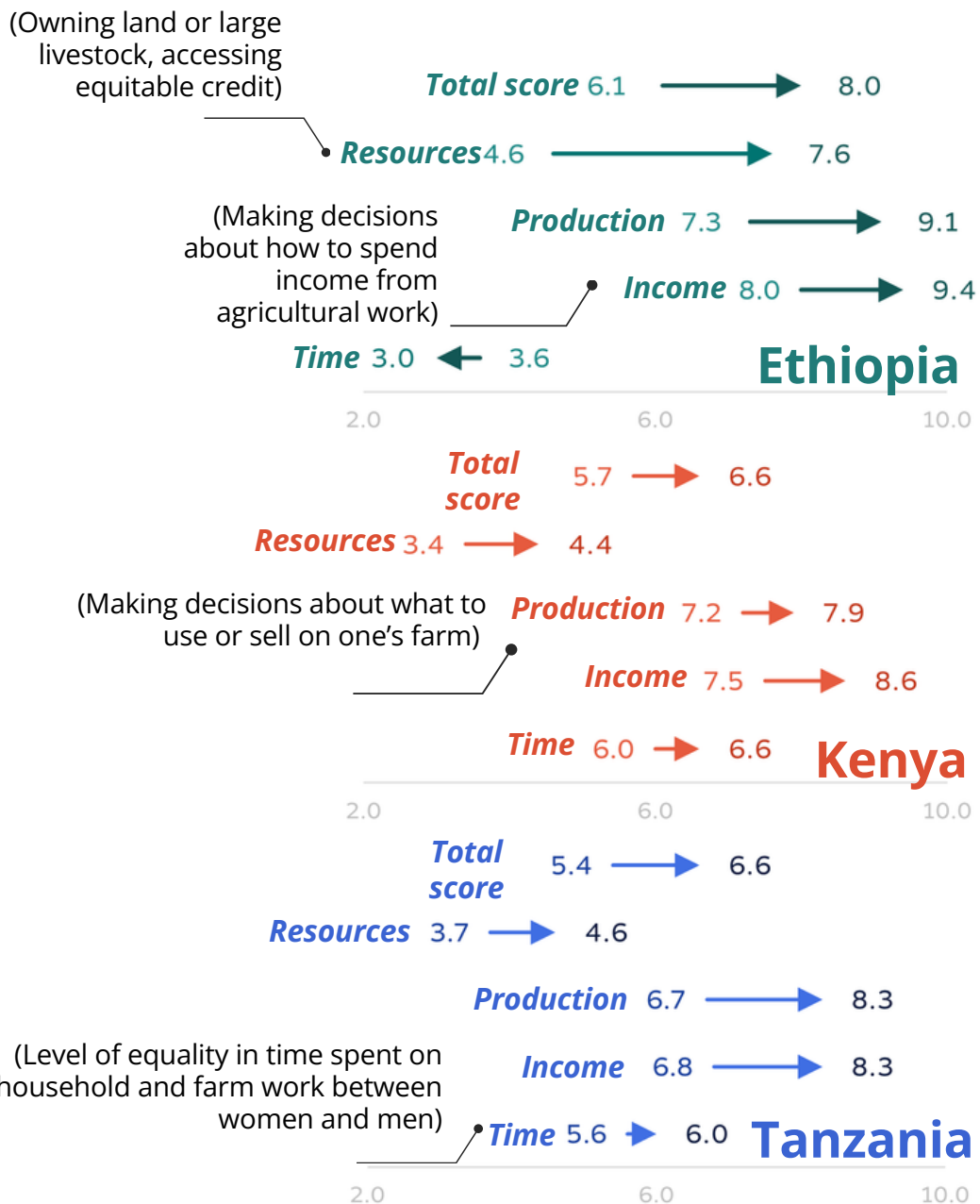
- Farmers use **more agroecological inputs and methods**, like local seeds and diverse crops, and they use **fewer non-ecological inputs**, like synthetic fertilizers.

AREAS OF CHALLENGE & FURTHER ENGAGEMENT

- **Women’s total workload on farms, in homes, and within their communities remains higher than men’s.** The project continues to work with families, and especially men, to find ways to distribute work fairly.
- Service providers need time and support to implement **survivor-centered approaches** that are better and safer for people who experience SGBV.
- Although people know more about SGBV prevention and response in their communities, **women’s satisfaction with available services and efforts varies significantly**, indicating a need for improvements.

What's changed for women since the start of the project?

To understand what impacts women in the project communities are experiencing, one of the indexes used scored four categories: resources, production, income, and time. The data below shows changes from the start of the project to the midline evaluation in 2024, with each score out of 10. For a detailed analysis of the full index data, see the RWCC Midline Evaluation Report.



Enhancing Women's Empowerment and Leadership

Strategies

Training on women's rights and gender equality is key, along with leadership learning exchanges and mentorship. In Kenya, for example, the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) supports participants in visualizing their goals, implementing plans and sharing solutions with peers.

Awareness campaigns, community forums, and multi-stakeholder dialogues are organized to support collaborative action. RWCC partners support community organizing on the three pillars, 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 advocacy. Coady Institute provides training in the mapping of community assets to help leverage resources.

Household dynamics and unequal care work are a focus of awareness-raising. In Ethiopia, male involvement in community groups and family gender analysis workshops are important to help address SGBV, as well as reinforce positive roles men play to support women's leadership.

Results

Women's empowerment in households, communities, and local food systems has increased across all three countries, with improvements in women's ownership of agroecological assets, access to loans, and decision-making on resources and agricultural sales.

"The strengthening of women's leadership in the agricultural sector has enhanced their self-confidence and agency, with women experiencing transformative change in decision-making."

However, women are not seeing a reduction in workload burdens. Efforts are underway to address this through male engagement, community dialogues, and labour-saving tools.

Women's confidence to advocate for themselves has grown. Nearly 80% of respondents in Ethiopia and Tanzania reported improved leadership and decision-making skills, with 55% agreeing in Kenya. Over 97% of women in Ethiopia, 91% in Kenya, and 98% in Tanzania reported increased confidence in climate policy forums. Women are leading budgeting advocacy for agroecological inputs (Tanzania and Kenya) and SGBV response funding (Kenya).

To date, 2,227 women have held leadership positions, locally and nationally. Community leaders have recognized the project's impact on fostering women's leadership in agricultural decision-making spaces.

Women's participation in multi-stakeholder dialogues has led to stronger commitment and accountability. Participants from 192 institutions have gained knowledge to improve gender equality in planning.

Kenya's Agroecology Movement: Martha Njenga's Leadership Journey



In Kamathatha village, Nakuru County, Martha Njenga has become a champion of agroecology. Faced with challenges like drought and poor irrigation, Martha applied innovative farming techniques learned through training, such as sunken beds and seed preservation methods using glass bottles and ash. These techniques have boosted her crop yields and inspired others in her community.

Martha trains local farmers on sustainable practices, including multi-storey kitchen gardens, water conservation, and crop diversification. Her success has led her to share her knowledge beyond her village through TikTok, where her videos have reached over 5.8 million views.

Through her social media platform, Martha has become an influential advocate for organic farming, emphasizing the health risks of agrochemicals. She supplies her farm's surplus to Nyakazi Organics and plans to create a seed bank to support youth and women in farming Indigenous crops, furthering her mission to transform agriculture in Kenya.

*Scan the QR code to learn
more about Martha's story.*



Addressing SGBV Prevention and Response

Strategies

Training with a survivor-centered approach is conducted with local institutions, service providers, and decision-makers at all levels. In Kenya, local service providers participate in community elders' workshops on SGBV, while in Tanzania, training involves farmer groups, traditional leaders, and religious leaders.

Partners have organized participatory assessments to improve SGBV services with communities, duty bearers, and service providers. Through these efforts, public officials have engaged in dialogue with women to understand necessary changes. In Ethiopia, multi-stakeholder forums were held to improve SGBV response capacity, and community watchdog groups now monitor and report cases.

Awareness-raising campaigns in all three countries, including media training in Kenya and Tanzania, focus on challenging social norms and increasing SGBV awareness and reporting.

These strategies are integrated within local agroecology and self-help groups, recognizing that safe spaces and women's right to freedom from violence are essential for women's empowerment in local food systems.

Results

Community awareness of prevention and response services, reporting mechanisms, and the willingness to report cases increased significantly in Ethiopia and Tanzania, according to the evaluation.

Among the highlights, the percentage of young women in Tanzania who indicated they would report a case of gender-based violence rose from 48% at baseline to 87% at midline. In Kenya, quantitative measurements showed few changes compared to the baseline or even decreased rates. However, qualitative measures validated observations of knowledge and attitude shifts among participants regarding SGBV in their communities.

The evaluation also revealed limited awareness among institutional duty bearers on the survivor-centered approach, highlighting the need for stronger advocacy on this issue. Additionally, midline data shows varying levels of satisfaction among female respondents regarding their community's efforts in SGBV prevention and response, reflecting diverse experiences across project areas.

Awareness-raising efforts have increased community demand for greater accountability from duty bearers. To enhance sustainability and local governance capacity, the project has integrated SGBV prevention and mitigation into local agroecology and Self-Help Group structures through trainings, discussion groups, and advocacy initiatives.

Tanzania's SGBV Advocacy: Magreth Basso's Leadership in Action



Magreth Basso, a farmer from Mwinkantsi village in Babati District, is a leader in both agroecology and the prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV). Previously relying on a one-acre maize plot with low yields, she struggled with high costs and environmental damage. In 2022, Magreth attended an agroecology training through the RWCC project, learning sustainable practices like crop diversification and the use of organic fertilizers and biopesticides.

Inspired by the training, she expanded her farm to five acres, cultivating maize, sunflower, cowpeas, peas, and millet. Her yield increased significantly, earning her income from selling the produce. Magreth also established a seed bank, ensuring sustainability for her farm and community.

Beyond farming, Magreth has become a powerful advocate for SGBV prevention, recently helping secure justice for a young survivor. Her leadership has earned her a nomination for the village council in the 2024 elections.

*Scan the QR code to learn
more about Magreth's story.*



Strengthening Climate-Resilient Food Systems

Strategies

Training and material support for agroecological production includes seed, crop, and animal diversification, sustainable cropping, agroforestry, soil and water conservation, and agroecological input production.

Microfinance groups were established to improve women's access to credit.

Partners support women's agroecology groups, demonstration farms, seed fairs, field schools, and dialogues with service providers to scale agroecological methods. In Kenya, over 2,000 farmers are involved in field schools.

Women's collective enterprises and value addition are supported with skills development, market research, and collection centres. In Kenya, SSN established a produce aggregation and vegetable dehydration centre to reduce post-harvest losses.

SeedChange's Seed Security Assessment and Action Plan guides the project's design, improving seed diversity, production, access, and quality.

Partners support women's access to resources and organize multi-stakeholder dialogues. In Tanzania, PELUM works with leaders to issue land rights certificates to rural women.

Results

The use of agroecological inputs and methods improved significantly. Changes included an increased use of farm-saved seeds, locally-adapted varieties, organic soil amendments, vertical gardening, crop diversification, crop rotation, and mixed and intercropping. These measures were linked to a decreased reliance on non-agroecological inputs and expenses, such as external seeds, synthetic fertilizers, and herbicides.

The project's approach played a key role in improving women's financial autonomy and agency. Women in Kenya reported greater self-sufficiency due to increased yields and income.

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%.

Across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania, there has been progress in women's ownership of productive assets and access to equitable loans. In Tanzania, 421 women acquired Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy in 2024.

Agroecological practices and community organizing are contributing to improved resilience to climate change impacts. Composting has enhanced soil fertility and resistance to erosion, while farm diversification and income-generating activities, such as vegetable and seedling production, have strengthened household strategies to adapt to environmental challenges.

Building Resilience in Ethiopia: Adhina Molla's Agroecology Journey



In North Wollo, Ethiopia, Adhina Molla has overcome barriers to land access, economic independence, and leadership. Through the RWCC project, she joined a Self-Help Group and received poultry training, transforming her livelihood.

Starting with her own savings, she purchased 30 chicks and later received 16 more through the project. Within months, she earned 96,000 Birr and reinvested in poultry farming. "The project has improved my family's livelihood by increasing my sources of income," she shares. "In addition, our homestead and field farm land's soil fertility is increasing." Using chicken manure, she enriches her soil, improving yields and ensuring food security despite unpredictable weather.

Beyond income generation, Adhina is strengthening her community's resilience. "I am participating in savings in my Self-Help Group. I am sharing my experience with the community," she says. With healthier soils and diversified income, she is better equipped to cope with irregular rainfall and pests. "I can withstand the loss of farm produce, which might happen." Inspired by her success, she now supports other farmers by distributing chicks and sharing climate-resilient farming practices.

Scan the QR code to learn more about Adhina's story.



A Holistic Approach

Partners have combined their strengths. In Kenya, for example, SSN builds on experience in farmer-to-farmer training via community seed bank ambassadors and climate champions who promote women's rights and agroecology. Hivos and GROOTS have adapted SSN's methods, such as biodiverse vertical gardens, into their women's leadership projects.

Actions under each pillar reinforce each other. 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. Agroecology activities are also carried out in combination with methods to promote women's confidence and leadership, and to raise awareness on SGBV. Women are increasingly recognized for their leadership as SGBV champions as well as in agroecology, due to increased confidence to act.

The midline evaluation confirmed that the RWCC project is perceived by participants to be relevant and timely, addressing local needs and priorities. The participatory and holistic methods of the project are also seen as essential for collaboration and increased support for gender equality to help ensure lasting impacts.

"The meetings held by RWCC have brought community cohesion and togetherness through sharing of peoples' ideas, which has brought tolerance and transparency in decision-making." - A young man in a focus group in Kitui, Kenya

Influencing a Supportive Enabling Environment

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

Partners are promoting a three-pillar approach in their policy work. For example, in Ethiopia, RWCC partners' advocacy is focused on: 1) Recognition of women as farmers who actively participate in agroecological decision-making; 2) Ensuring that women can live free from sexual and gender-based violence; and 3) The implementation of gender provisions within agricultural policies and extension systems.

National agroecology strategies in the three countries now provide an opportunity to support a growing momentum in support of agroecology and also to influence projects and policies towards a rights-based approach. For example, in Tanzania, PELUM is a key implementation coordinator on the National Ecological Organic Agriculture Strategy's Task Force, bringing gender analysis to the forefront. In Kenya, partners are leading a multi-stakeholder pilot project for gender transformative agroecology training with extension practitioners and farmer champions to further support the national agroecology strategy.

Conclusion

The midline evaluation of the RWCC project found significant progress toward its objectives. 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.” The evaluation recommended further exploring ways to reduce women’s labour burden through male engagement and strengthening advocacy for a survivor-centered approach to SGBV prevention and response.

These results highlight the importance of integrating agroecology and women’s rights. Each pillar reinforces the others: women’s empowerment drives collective action, SGBV prevention removes barriers to participation, and strengthening local food systems improves income, autonomy, and resilience. Holistic, participatory strategies foster community cohesion and collaboration at local and national levels, ensuring sustainability and scalability.



Martha Njenga, a seed ambassador, trains farmers and partners at her Kamathatha farm, Kenya, 2024.

Call to Action

Support women farmers' empowerment and resilient food systems:

- **Uphold women's rights** to food, freedom from discrimination and violence, and access to productive resources.
- **Fund women-led agroecology organizations and networks**, ensuring their participation in public decision-making.
- **Provide gender equality training for men**, including agricultural extension agents, and foster male allies for women's rights.
- **Strengthen SGBV prevention and response** with a survivor-centered approach.
- **Centre women's knowledge, priorities, and agency** in climate-resilient agriculture and adaptation strategies.
- **Integrate gender transformative approaches** into agricultural extension and national ecological farming strategies.
- **Ensure policies and initiatives** to secure women's rights to land, agroecology resources, services, and fair markets.
- **Promote policies** that support agroecological products, empowering women and sustaining local food systems.
- **Defend farmers' rights** to freely grow, save, exchange, and sell seeds.
- **Recognize women's contributions** to seed security and their empowerment in farmer seed systems.
- **Invest** in farmer-led organizations, training centres, policy processes, and enterprises advancing agroecology with rural women's leadership.
- **Share and scale up** successful approaches for women's rights and agroecology, nationally and internationally.

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Images on Pages 22 & 23:

Seeds from a seed fair and a women's farmer group gathering in Kikundi Village, Morogoro, Tanzania, 2024.






Rural Women Cultivating Change (RWCC) is a project of SeedChange, made possible thanks to Global Affairs Canada, Coady Institute, and local partner organizations in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania.

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