



INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE WOMAN FARMER

Partnering with Women Farmers to Build Sustainable Food Systems

Investment in women farmers is one of the most impactful strategies for building resilient food systems that ensure nutrition and livelihood security for all. When women farmers have equitable access to resources, markets and leadership, communities win.

This year, Heifer International joins global development partners in recognizing the critical role of women farmers — especially women smallholder farmers — in producing food for the world. The International Year of the Woman Farmer (IYWF) is a call to mobilize partnerships and resources to address persistent challenges facing women in agriculture, including limited access to finance, markets and decision-making power.

According to a 2021 report by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), agrifood systems employ 40 percent of working women worldwide. This underscores the vital role women play in feeding their families, strengthening local economies and sustaining global food production. Yet across regions, women farmers tell a strikingly similar story: Restrictive social norms, unequal access to land and productive resources, disproportionate unpaid care burdens, and exclusion from formal markets reduce their ability to grow profitable enterprises and strengthen food security.

The cost of this inequality is immense. Women-owned farms produce 20-30 percent less on average than men's, largely due to unequal access to resources. This gap is not a reflection of capability, but of structural barriers that limit women's access to land, finance, inputs, markets and decision-making power. If women had the same access to productive assets as men, farm yields could rise by up to 30 percent and global hunger could fall by as much as 17 percent, as per FAO estimates.

Gender inequality exacerbates poverty and food insecurity — but the stories women farmers tell do not end there. With tailored support, women farmers are leading food-systems transformation grounded in regenerative practices,

collective enterprise and community leadership.

Furthermore, prioritizing women in rural, remote, conflict-prone and climatical-vulnerable regions is essential. These women face the most severe food security challenges and represent nearly 60 percent of the world's most chronically hungry global population. Targeted investment in these regions is a strategic imperative for long-term economic and social stability. Supporting women in underserved and climate-vulnerable communities strengthens local food production, reduces dependence on aid, and builds resilience against economic and environmental shocks.

Yet, investment alone is not enough. Resources must go hand in hand with matched power, strengthening women's voice, agency and leadership at every level of the food system. Through this year, we call for bold investment in women farmers while elevating their lived experiences and leadership, recognizing that lasting solutions begin by listening to, and following, the women shaping change on the ground.

She Has a Story to Tell — and Heifer is Listening

Ensuring women's voice, leadership and equitable access to agricultural resources and markets is essential to nourishing sustainable food systems that allow women to improve their livelihoods. That's why Heifer is amplifying voices of women farmers like Rosa Maquín through the "She Has a Story to Tell" campaign.



"I am happy to cultivate cacao because now it generates income for me.... Currently, I am covering my expenses with the sale of this product. Additionally, with that, I can support my children with their food and education, so that they also have a source of income."

— **Rosa Maquín**
CACOA PRODUCER, GUATEMALA



SHE HAS A STORY TO TELL

To hear from more women farmers, follow the "She Has A Story" Campaign and Heifer International on social media and at www.heifer.org/IYWF.



Heifer's Approach: Women-Led, Community-Driven Change

Drawing on decades of experience across Africa, Asia and the Americas, Heifer International has seen that when women farmers have the tools, resources and decision-making power to grow their enterprises and lead in their communities, families prosper, communities thrive and ecosystems thrive.

Through locally led training programs and organized collectives, Heifer partners with women farmers to drive regenerative, market-based food systems change. Heifer collaborates with thousands of women-led self-help groups and farmer-owned cooperatives, representing hundreds of thousands of members worldwide.

Through shared knowledge and collective power, women farmers have become influential leaders — strengthening enterprises, influencing decisions, and elevating their voices across communities and countries.

Heifer serves as a facilitator, market connector and capacity strengthener, supporting women to lead community-driven solutions and chart their own development pathways. Women gain access to skills, technology and capital in ways that build social capital and create a foundation for inclusive, long-lasting change. Strategic partnerships with women-led groups, governments and private-sector actors further accelerate impact as women grow profitable livelihoods and leadership.



Approximately two-thirds of Heifer's farming partners are women.



In FY23, women held nearly half of leadership positions in enterprises, such as cooperatives and self-help groups, that are associated with Heifer programs.

Impact across regions

Women farmers are delivering measurable gains in income, resilience and leadership when they are supported to lead food-systems change.

Africa: Developing Collective Power for Sustainable Food Systems

In [Rwanda](#), women farmers transformed small weekly savings into thriving collective enterprises, launching a chicken feed business, improving dairy practices and doubling milk production. Through cooperatives supported by Heifer's *Rwanda Dairy Development* project, women overcame barriers to training, finance and markets, increasing incomes, food security and leadership.

In [Uganda](#), youth farmers — many of them women — increased their income by 70 percent after applying business tools and training through self-help groups and cooperatives supported by Heifer's *Learn for Agribusiness* project. They used the cooperatives' collective resources to leverage market connections and access micro-loans to grow their businesses.



Americas: Fostering Inclusive Market Systems

In [Ecuador](#), 2,628 farming households adopted locally driven, climate-smart practices, such as intercropping and rainwater harvesting, through Heifer's *Future of Food* program, boosting their resilience and income. The intervention prioritized rural women and Indigenous families, and women-led farmer associations gained legal recognition and access to public investment.

In [Honduras](#), a women-led dairy enterprise increased its milk production by 500 percent, growing daily output from approximately 50 gallons to 300 gallons — after receiving technical assistance through Heifer's *Leveraging Success* project. The initiative prioritizes closing the income gap for women entrepreneurs in the coffee, dairy and honey sectors. With improved milk quality and higher production, women leaders also expanded into value-added products, such as cheese, cream and yogurt, boosting monthly revenue by approximately \$6,000.



Asia: Promoting Equitable Participation in Community-Led Development

In [Bangladesh](#), Indigenous women farmers combined skills training, cooperative support and direct links to formal markets to adopt climate-smart practices and significantly increase their incomes. One participant in the *Women Farmers Grow Vegetables, Flowers and Wealth* project more than doubled her seasonal earnings from about \$574 to \$902, illustrating how market access and skills development fuel women-led enterprise growth.

In [Nepal](#), women's economic decision-making power rose sharply after participating in Heifer's Strengthening *Smallholder Enterprises of Livestock Value Chain* program, with those reporting primary decision-making power over personal finances rising from 51.8 percent to 86.9 percent





Heifer Supports Women Farmers Now and in the Future

Heifer's programs catalyze opportunities for leadership, entrepreneurship and economic advancement, enabling women and communities to drive their own development. As regenerative and inclusive models are scaled, more women farmers will have stories of opportunity to tell their stories of growth and leadership.

This International Year of the Woman Farmer — and every year — we're listening. Are you?

Take Collective Action

Heifer International partners with farming organizations, governments, donors, businesses, researchers and other food systems stakeholders to:

- **Advance** innovation in agricultural development
- **Scale** regenerative, inclusive models for food systems transformation
- **Support** sustainable locally led strategies for smallholder farmers

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ABOUT HEIFER INTERNATIONAL

Heifer International partners with smallholder farmers to sustainably address hunger and poverty in their communities while caring for the Earth. Since 1944, Heifer has supported nearly 60 million farming households, particularly those led by women, youth and Indigenous populations. Operating in 19 countries across Africa, Asia and the Americas, we aspire to collaborate with millions more smallholder farming households by 2030 through farmer-led, regenerative food systems.