



Gender Equality and Justice: Key to Achieving Resilient Livelihoods



Introduction

Women's rights are at the heart of resilient livelihoods. Achieving women's rights and gender equality are key in transforming the food system and the world of work. If we look at agriculture alone, 43% of all agricultural workers globally are women playing crucial roles in achieving food security, accounting for 50-80 % of all food produced. Yet, their rights are not respected, and they remain highly vulnerable to food insecurity compounded by gender inequity, threats of climate change, and insecure livelihoods. Despite being responsible for most of the world's food supply, women farmers do not have access to the same resources or opportunities as men – land, finance, training, or technical inputs – all of which are necessary for cultivating healthy and nutritious food and building resilient livelihoods.

Women and girls disproportionately face gender-based violence and shoulder responsibilities for unpaid care and domestic work. A huge rollback on women's rights – for example, on sexual and reproductive health rights – further compound the situation. Women, girls and other marginalised genders are also at the forefront of bearing the brunt of natural disasters and pandemics globally.

While it is important to recognise and address local conditions that hinder women from having equal opportunities on livelihoods, it is imperative that we address the systemic barriers that prevent gender equality and gender justice from taking root. We need to work towards profound shifts in policies that would tilt the balance in favour of women, girls, and other marginalised genders.

This backgrounder outlines the intersection of gender inequality and injustice, climate crisis, and livelihoods. It contextualises VSO's work and our approaches in addressing it. We put forward some key ideas in advancing gender equality and justice.

Confronting the Problem: Embedding Inclusion and Intersectionality

Gender inequity hinders economic progress and stifles economic development. It impedes access to resources, education, and economic empowerment. The climate crisis further magnifies this as women constitute the majority of the world's poor, accounting for seventy percent of the 1.3 billion people living in conditions of poverty.¹ Unprecedented climatic and environmental shocks facing rural farming communities – such as prolonged drought, soil erosion, landslides, flash floods – are disrupting food production systems, with women disproportionately suffering the brunt of this intersecting crisis. Such conditions amplify the social, economic, and political pressures on resources spurring conflicts around the world.

Especially in rural farming communities, land is an invaluable asset in agricultural production, food security and nutrition. Yet less than 15 percent of agricultural landholders around the world are women, and in certain contexts as low as 5 percent.² This shocking discrepancy demonstrates how women are consistently overlooked when it comes to access to vital resources and investments. On top of this, women and girls in rural communities often face increasingly hostile environments conducive for gender-based violence, sexual violence, child marriage, and trafficking. Despite these alarming consequences, women remain excluded from policy and decision-making arenas which fail to consider women's rights and their specific needs.³

VSO recognises that women and girls are disadvantaged socially and economically, which is one of the primary causes of poverty. While 143 out of 195 countries have guaranteed equality between women and men in their Constitution discrimination against women and other non-binary gender identities persists directly and indirectly.⁴ VSO commits to address this inequality by promoting their agency, power, and voice. This means women, men, girls, boys and those who do not identify as male or female, should enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections. Most forms of exclusion have their roots in gendered socio-economic structures, so it is vital that we address gender through a social inclusion lens to understand the gendered system, structures and context of our programmes. When all genders have equal access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes, communities thrive, and sustainable development becomes a reality.



Hence, VSO's priority is to ensure that gender and social inclusion is embedded across its programme areas thereby tackling issues of gender inequity and gender-based violence. It works with women and girls with disabilities and delivers innovative approaches in education including sign language, inclusive education and pedagogy and work on other forms of disability.

- VSO's intersectional approach ensures a person's social and political identities are considered when analysing discrimination and privilege. Consideration is given to the interconnected nature of race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability, and how this compound interdependent systems of disadvantage as well as power.
- Strengthen collective voice and power of women and girls through cooperatives, groups, associations, networks and movements, which are empowered to lobby and advocate for the interest of their members.
- Social inclusive and gender transformative interventions.

What VSO is doing?

At VSO, we believe that gender equality and justice form the bedrock of resilient livelihoods. VSO supports women particularly young women through the promotion of women's right to adequate food, control over incomes and productive resources and adoption of agroecology/climate-resilient agriculture. Furthermore, the interventions assisting women small-scale food producers, including those with disabilities, assist them to increase their collective power in markets and transition to gender justice and climate resilient livelihoods.

VSO applies a multi-pronged approach, delivering programmes that support women and girls to organise and mobilise, facilitate their engagement in policy processes that bring their voice and concerns to duty bearers, strengthening social accountability. VSO also works on preventing gender-based violence through transformative gender norms change, for example with the PRAYAS project in Nepal and the Speak It Loud project in Zimbabwe. As such, VSO actively engages in international policy spaces where we advocate for gender equity, sustainable livelihoods and climate change, most notably the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), UN Climate Change Commission (UNCCC), African Union (AU), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and UN Food and Agriculture (FAO) and its Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism (CSIPM), the Agroecology Coalition, Climate Action Network (CAN) and with national governments.

Central to VSO's approach is its commitment to address the root causes of gender inequality and exclusion and to promote transformative gender norm approaches that requires working at all levels. This spans from individual to family/community levels with meaningful participation and engagement of all stakeholders including the men and boys.

- Individual: We centre women and girls' rights and those of other excluded genders in our programming.
- Community: We believe that the empowerment of women and girls at household and community level go hand in hand.
- System change: VSO takes an in-depth look at social exclusion and gender analysis (SEGA) across our health, education, and livelihoods programmes. SEGA involves our programme and project stakeholders, particularly primary actors' men, women, LGBTQI, reflecting on the system of social exclusion and gender equality in their context and looking at how it relates to marginalisation and poverty. This allows women and communities to fully understand the power dynamics at play and the causes and consequences of exclusion in the societies we work in.
- Laws, both official and customary, continue to legitimise and institutionalise exclusion. We are working with local actors to advocate against these and address social exclusion. VSO programmes also conduct gender audits to highlight gaps and to address them.

VSO's volunteering for development (V4D) approach stands as a powerful vehicle for fostering gender equality and justice, driving transformative change within communities. It is the organising mechanism to bring people together globally to find creative solutions for transformation change. It is anchored in evidence



from years of practice and learning and will continue to do so. It builds on our people first principles, relational volunteering model and our core approaches.

A glimpse of VSO's projects:



Social Accountability Collective Realisation in Extractives Industry (CLARITY project) Action for Rights

The CLARITY project works to make the extractive industry more responsible by addressing the challenges that exclude women, youth, and people with disabilities. It works with informal artisanal women miners in Tanzania's Lake Zone districts to improve their working conditions, seek justice for gender-based violence, and improve incomes through a pilot on small-scale artisanal mining enterprise. Key impacts include greater access to justice in terms of creating structures of referrals for addressing Gender Based Violence (GBV), workplace exploitation, as well as human and environmental rights violations. Social accountability engagements have resulted to creating conducive relationship between duty bearers and primary actors, facilitating government funds for different schemes/programmes, tracking of accountability of mining companies (especially their CSR spending), legal advocacy for environmental conservation.



Generating Resilient Environments & Promoting Socio-economic Development of East Tonle Sap Lake (GREEN), Cambodia

The GREEN project (2021-25) helps boost incomes and create sustainable agriculture for vulnerable communities. Those living on the shores of the Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia depend on its resources for their income, yet climate change and overfishing are threatening their livelihoods. VSO, in partnership with National University of Battambang (NUBB), works on the green economy component – aiming to improve environmental awareness and green economy and livelihoods initiatives. The GREEN project (2021-25) is helping to boost incomes and create sustainable agriculture for the most vulnerable communities through strengthening green value chains, creating awareness of environmental issues to create behavioural change and through establishing a green business incubator programme to support vulnerable youth and local businesses.



Volunteer Margret Damba delivering training on safeguarding. Mashonaland, Zimbabwe.

Our work on climate change adaptation and Gender in Zimbabwe

On 23 January 2022, tropical storm Ana hit Mbire community where VSO works together with one of our partners, Katswe Sisterhood. The district is prone to floods and climatic events which directly affects food quality, security, and livelihoods. VSO works closely with the community and partners to implement resilience strategies. Unfortunately, these challenges have been linked to increased incidents of gender-based violence and child marriage, with the Mbire district experiencing the highest rates in the country.

National VSO volunteers worked hard to create and embed resilience techniques with community members enabling them to adapt to environmental changes, become resilient against shocks, to diversify their livelihoods (for example through owning goats) and to challenge the harmful norms that perpetuate cycles of gender-based based violence. These projects provide much-needed income and financial security for women as well as a safe space to discuss issues around Gender based violence and sexual reproductive health and rights. One outcome of this project is that it has allowed our national volunteer, Margret Damba, to send our message to the UN urging countries to put women's rights at the centre of responses to climate change and disaster risk reduction.



Pad Up Creations, Nigeria one of CFYE's partners that provides decent work to young women to create sanitary pads from waste materials so young girls can attend school.

Challenge Fund for Youth Employment, multi-country

With the Challenge Fund for Youth Employment (CFYE), VSO creates a more prosperous future for 200,000 young people – particularly women – by supporting youth employment initiatives, within West Africa/Sahel, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East. Our work supports employment opportunities that are not only productive, but also provide a stable income and a safe working environment with respect for rights and social protection.

This five-year program is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and managed by a consortium of partners: VSO, Palladium and Randstad. The first CFYE programs started in late 2020 in Uganda, followed by Egypt and Nigeria (March 2021), Jordan, Sudan, and Kenya (later in 2021). In 2022, CFYE programs will also start in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Senegal, Mali, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

CFYE covers themes such as gender economic empowerment, decent work, creating quality sustainable jobs and youth engagement empowerment and resilience. By using an integrated approach, the project makes sure that the (learned) skills of young people are better matched with the qualities required on the labour market.



Young women in Humla planting rice using the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) method. It's a low-water, labour-intensive method that uses younger seedlings to produce a higher crop yield.

Transforming fragilities: Promoting Inclusive Resilience and Accountability through Youth Association Strengthening (PRAYAS), Nepal

PRAYAS is a consortium project led by VSO and funded by the EU, in partnership with Association of Youth Organizations Nepal (AYON), Friends Service Council Nepal (FSCN), and Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (ACORAB). It aims to strengthen the role of youth-led community service organisations to engage youth and marginalised groups in climate and disaster resilience.

Youth are a key target group as they are the leaders of tomorrow and have the influence to create future change by contributing to governance and development processes. PRAYAS hopes to create an environment where youth are included at all stages of climate and disaster planning. Local youth leaders, volunteers, and ambassadors complete capacity trainings and pass on their knowledge to their peers. They also conduct action and awareness campaigns and coordinate with local authorities to educate youth on current climate policies. Local governments value the input of these youth groups and invite them to share their perspective on various issues focused on youth, climate and disaster resilience and community development.

Going forward: challenging inequality and injustice in the four domains of change

Throughout history, women and marginalized genders have faced systemic discrimination, limited opportunities, and social injustices rooted in patriarchal structures. Shedding light on systemic disparities and calling for transformative change is not enough; concrete actions and structural reforms are necessary.

At the individual level, it is important to put the rights of women, girls and other excluded genders front and centre of challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes. This involves promoting gender-sensitive education, awareness raising that fosters respect of women and other marginalised genders, and engaging men and boys as allies in promoting gender equality.

At the community level, it is crucial to create inclusive and safe spaces that encourage equal participation, representation, and decision-making. It requires addressing cultural and social norms that perpetuate gender inequalities, supporting women's leadership and participation, and promoting gender-responsive community initiatives and programs.

At the policy level, there is a need to enact and enforce laws that protect and promote gender equality. This includes eliminating discriminatory legislation, ensuring equal access to justice, and implementing gender-responsive policies and programs across various sectors. It also involves promoting gender mainstreaming in policy development and implementation, as well as allocating sufficient resources for gender-focused initiatives.

At the systemic level, transforming institutions and systems to be gender-responsive and inclusive is imperative. This requires addressing power imbalances, promoting women's representation in decision-making positions, and ensuring equal opportunities for all genders in employment, economic participation, and political spheres. It involves integrating gender perspectives into governance structures, establishing accountability mechanisms, and fostering partnerships for gender equality.

By challenging gender inequality and gender injustice at these various levels, we can create a society where everyone, regardless of gender, has equal rights, opportunities, and access to resources. Achieving gender equality is not only a matter of justice and human rights but also a prerequisite for sustainable development and social progress. It calls for collective action, collaboration, and the mobilization of resources to dismantle barriers, change mindsets, and create a more equitable and inclusive world for all.

References

¹ Osman-Elasha, B. (2012) 'In the shadow of climate change', UN Chronicle, 46(4), pp. 54–55. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18356/5d941c92-en>.

² FAO/IFPRI (2018) The gender gap in land rights . Rome . Available at: <https://www.fao.org/3/i8796en/i8796en.pdf> (Accessed: 28 June 2023).

³ Odiwuor, F. (2002) Women Smallholder Farmers: What is the Missing Link for the Food System in Africa?, Africa Up Close . Available at: <https://africaupclose.wilsoncenter.org/women-smallholder-farmers/> (Accessed: 28 June 2023).

⁴ 'Gender Equality: Why it Matters ' (2020) Sustainable Development Goals. United Nations Organisation . Available at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp->

Thank you

Our work wouldn't be possible without the dedication and support of thousands of people, partners, and organisations.

From the volunteers who share their time and skills in our programmes around the world, to the partners who work with us on programme development, delivery, research and fundraising.

From the staff and supporters who work tirelessly on our behalf, to the people and organisations who donate the vital funds needed to support our work – and all those who generously choose to leave a gift in their Will.

The change is being felt by over a million people around the world, right now. Together, we're working towards a fair world for everyone. Thank you.

If you would like to know more about VSO's work worldwide, visit www.vsointernational.org

VSO 100 London Road Kingston
upon Thames KT2 6QJ UK
+44 (0)20 8780 7500

enquiry@vsoint.org
vsointernational.org
youtube.com/user/vsointernational
vsointernational.org/blog



Voluntary Service Overseas is a company limited by guarantee. Registered in England and Wales registered number 703509. Registered Office 100 London Road, Kingston upon Thames KT2 6QJ. Charity Registration 313757 (England and Wales)