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Africa: Women Farmers in Africa Call for More Support

By Moki Edwin Kindzeka

YAOUNDE, Cameroon, December 20, 2013 (VOA) — Analysts estimate women farmers produce about 90 percent of the food in Africa. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization adds that two-thirds of African women find jobs in agriculture. Leaders of organizations that advocate on behalf of African women farmers met here to develop ways of making agriculture more profitable for them.

In Santa, in north-west Cameroon, Adamu Maino is busy raising his cows on a piece of family land he seized from his sister, Maimonatou Aisha, in adherence to cultural traditions. Leaders of an African women farmers association, including Cameroonian-born Veronica Kini, have gone there to encourage Maimonatou in her struggle to recover the land.

"You do not expect a woman who has been cultivating a piece of land for 30 years, and just because she is a woman, she has no right to own that piece of land. They say she is a woman, she will be married to a different family, so she has no right to own the piece of land," said Kini.

Maimonatou is just one of millions of female African farmers who face a range of problems, including traditional practices, being denied access to land, and difficulties acquiring loans. Simadana Elizabeth from Malawi says the problems are similar across the continent.

"Most of us do not own land. When you go to financial institutions, the banks, when you want to access credits, they ask for land titles and again you find that most women do not own the titles, so it is a common challenge and we need to get a solution for it," said she.

Elizabeth adds women farmers still use archaic tools and methods of farming. "We have not mechanized the way we do our work, so you find that we use what is commonly known as hoes to do our work. You find that the output is low so we need to come up with a voice that is convincing to our donors, to our governments so that they can give a helping hand to feed this

continent, to feed the world. We do not have a voice, we never get time to come out with one voice and solve our personal problems," said Elizabeth.

Pillars of agriculture

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization considers women farmers pillars of African agriculture. They produce nearly 90 percent of the food grown in Africa and are responsible for preparing food for their families. Alice Kwanjana, a native of Kenya, says women there are still marginalized.

"Women are not expected to stand out in the presence of men, so we feel that they cannot express themselves properly. The impact of climate change is also affecting the women. Women are expected to do most of the activities in the homes, even in the communities like taking care of the children, the sick, during funerals all over, weddings everything. All the community activities are most of the time by the women," said Kwanjana.

For three days, women farmers groups meeting in Cameroon examined the difficulties they believe hinder women's progress.

Among the concerns are long-standing problems that governments seem to do little to solve. Veronica Kini said the problem is inertia. "It is really deplorable. We have been saying this over and over again. Can you imagine a woman of let's say 50 years (of age) carrying a bag of around 50 kilograms on the head, crossing a bridge that is not well constructed. I think it is deplorable, we need tractors, we need harvesters, they know what we need," said Kini.

Among the resolutions agreed to at the Yaounde conference is to make women more aware of their rights. The president of the network of farmers for Central Africa, Elizabeth Atangana, said this can be achieved through training.

"Training was one of the main recommendations we had, so that they can be able to take initiative and negotiate and also defend their interest," said Atangana.

Malian-born Simadala Elizabeth added that the time to act was now. "We are now all going to campaign and lobby so that our programs can be supported by both the government and development partners," said Elizabeth.

According to the United Nations, more than one-and-a-half billion women in the world depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, but they are quite often not able to benefit from general agricultural funding because of cultural barriers and lack of access to land and funding.