

Co-op farmer Florence Uwamahoro is changing mindsets in rural Rwanda

"The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promises to leave no one behind. To deliver on that, we must help rural women to thrive, and to access the support and information they need, so that they can fulfil their potential without leaving their communities."

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

Reporting from the field, in the Southern province of Rwanda, Andrea Westcott-Lacoursiere, Gender and Governance Officer for the Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA) Rwanda Co-operative Agricultural Growth project, shares the story of Florence Uwamahoro, an inspiring young woman and member of the CODERIKA rice cooperative, who is also a single mother to her five-year-old son.



I had the opportunity to meet an intriguing young woman named Florence Uwamahoro when I accompanied CCA Rwanda agronomists on a field visit to the CODERIKA rice fields. I was immediately interested in Florence because being 27 years old she is relatively young to be the member of an agricultural co-operative and to have several of her own fields. In fact, she has been a member of the CODERIKA co-operative since 2007, when she was 19 years old. I was also very curious to hear her story because while protecting her crops from being eaten by birds she wore a pair of Bermuda shorts, which you will rarely, if ever, see Rwandan women or girls wearing in rural areas. As it turns out, Florence pushes gender binaries in Rwanda in more ways than just her choice of clothing.

As we waded through the rice fields, Florence and I had a light-hearted conversation through a mix of broken Kinyarwanda and French. She immediately struck me as a confident young woman, telling me with pride that she is the mother of a little boy named Life Happy Christian. After learning that Florence was a single-mother, I asked her if she wouldn't mind sharing her story with me, and she accepted enthusiastically. With the help of my Rwandan colleagues, I asked Florence how her community reacts to her choice of dress. She explained that she was born and has spent her whole life in Kinazi, the district surrounding the co-operative's fields, and ever since she was little has been known as a tomboy. Fortunately, her parents supported her clothing preferences,

and bought her shorts as opposed to skirts and dresses like other girls. And so, her community is now accustomed to the way she dresses.

Having spoken to other women co-operative members who explained that single mothers, unmarried women and widows are often excluded from Rwandan society, I was curious to know if Florence experiences exclusion within her community. Florence explained that, for the most part her community accepts her and her lifestyle choices. However, when unmarried girls and women become pregnant, the response is typically negative. In her experience, she came into confrontation with members of her community who were very angry and frustrated with her because she was still in high school when she became pregnant. Often, when girls like Florence become pregnant they abandon their studies and stay at home during the course of their pregnancy to avoid such confrontations, but once the baby is born the community accepts the mother and child back into society. In Florence's case, she explained that once her son was born her community welcomed her back with open arms and supported and encouraged her ambitions.

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In fact, Florence commented that being a single mother has perhaps allowed her more freedom than married women within her community. Following the birth of her son, she began working to support them both. She took over some of the rice fields that her family owned and became a member of the CODERIKA rice co-operative. As the primary breadwinner for her and her child, earning money is a prime concern for Florence, which is why she jumped at the opportunity to participate in CCA trainings on savings and credit, as well as training on income generating activities (IGAs) and starting small businesses. Before these workshops rice production was her sole revenue-generating activity, but after the trainings Florence saved some of the additional income from increased rice production to begin rearing animals, and now has four goats and three pigs.

Following the trainings, Florence began to reflect on options for IGAs that she could do in addition to rice cultivation in a rural setting. Her primary criterion was that it needed to be a profitable activity, and so she began her own banana-beer brewing business even though it is typically a male-dominated activity. Florence can now make two batches of banana beer per month, and earn an additional 40,000RWF (\$65 Canadian dollars) per month for her and her son by selling it in a local Cabaret bar. She says that this additional revenue has improved her and her family's wellbeing because she can now afford to pay for health coverage, as well as her son's school fees.



Indeed, often the most profitable activities are normally those that are related with “men’s work”. Florence rationalizes that because there is a historically and culturally entrenched gender division of labour in Rwanda, women don’t think of doing work that is typically associated with men such as banana-beer brewing, the construction of bricks, building houses, or being a mechanic or chauffeur. As such, Florence stands out in her community and is contributing to changing mindsets about the gender division of labour, as she does not distinguish between gendered activities but considers which type of work pays better.

During field visits with other women co-operative members, many women explained to me that the principal barrier to gender equality was men, and their attitudes and expectations concerning gender roles. In fact, many women explained that men don’t support their wives learning about gender equality. They would even sabotage or wouldn’t support their wives in having their own IGAs because they were concerned that they wouldn’t complete all of the domestic work, or they didn’t want their wives “to be superior to them”. As a single-mother I was curious about what Florence thought of this. She explained that being single she has the freedom to choose what projects she will pursue, such as selling banana beer in a Cabaret. However, if she were a married woman, perhaps her husband wouldn’t support her because he wouldn’t want her to come home late or to sell alcohol to men in the first place. Florence explained that in her hometown of Kinazi there has been substantial engagement on gender equality, and so now there are less conflicts between men and women. She thinks that where there are such problems, outreach, such as the trainings CCA does, needs to be done on gender equality and equitable household financial management so that men understand the benefits that gender equality has for the entire family and for the development of the community.

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It is also important to note that off-farm IGAs increase the resiliency of co-operative farmers to food insecurity caused by climate change. Indeed, the reason why the CCA agronomists came to visit the CODERIKI rice fields that day was to provide expertise on

how to cope with a virus that attacked a popular rice variety that caused the plant to produce husks that do not contain any rice. This variety produces both a high quality and quantity of rice, but is sensitive to viruses. Due to increased flooding during this year's rainy season, the virus was able to spread through the water channels across the entirety of the co-operative's rice fields, and all plots planted with the TOX variety were affected.

In fact, of the six plots that Florence cultivates, three were compromised because of this virus. Thankfully, Florence planted another more resistant, but less productive variety in her other three plots so her entire harvest won't be lost. In any case, without additional income from her other activities IGAs, such a loss would be devastating for a single-parent family. Fortunately, thanks to her banana-beer brewing project, her and her son's food security, health, nutrition and education will not be seriously affected.

Despite this setback, Florence has a lot of hope and ambitions for the future. With the additional revenue she earns she hopes to save up enough money to get her motorcycle and car driving licences, as well as pay for professional studies in order to become a chauffeur-mechanic. Nonetheless, in Kinazi, her community supports and encourages her with this ambition like they do with her banana beer brewing business.



Although people often make jokes about her choice of dress and activities, she explains that these jokes aren't mean-spirited and actually motivate her. In fact, she explains that she has found an incredible support network and solidarity amongst her fellow co-operative members. They offer her encouragement, and also support her financially by drinking her beer as opposed to going to other Cabarets. Her fellow members, both men and women, also support and push her to become a chauffeur-mechanic because they would prefer to travel with her as opposed to someone else.

When we last spoke Florence had just written the theory-driving test for her motorcycle license and is awaiting the results. She explained that she wants to primarily focus on her driving permits and professional education so that she can continue to support her family, but hopes to eventually return to high school and obtain her high school diploma. Ever since she was little Florence has been interested in cars, but becoming a chauffeur-mechanic always seemed like a daydream because of her unexpected pregnancy and lack of means to pay for such studies. Now Florence feels empowered to pursue her dreams and create the life that she wants for herself and her son.

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