

African Women's Collaborative for Healthy Food Systems

Peasant Rights and Taking Care of Mother Earth

April is a significant time for peasant and indigenous women, with two international days that recognize their contribution and efforts to maintain the health and wellbeing of people and the planet. April 17th is the International Day of Peasant Struggle while April 22nd marks International Mother Earth Day. These two days resonate strongly with the mission and vision of the [African Women's Collaborative for Healthy Food Systems](#) which seeks to recreate and promote a way of life that respects, takes care of and restores Mother Earth and her resources while benefiting African people and their communities.



Members of Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum ([ZIMSOFF](#)) light candles to commemorate peasant farmers who lost their lives in the fight for social justice April 17th International Day of Peasant Struggle

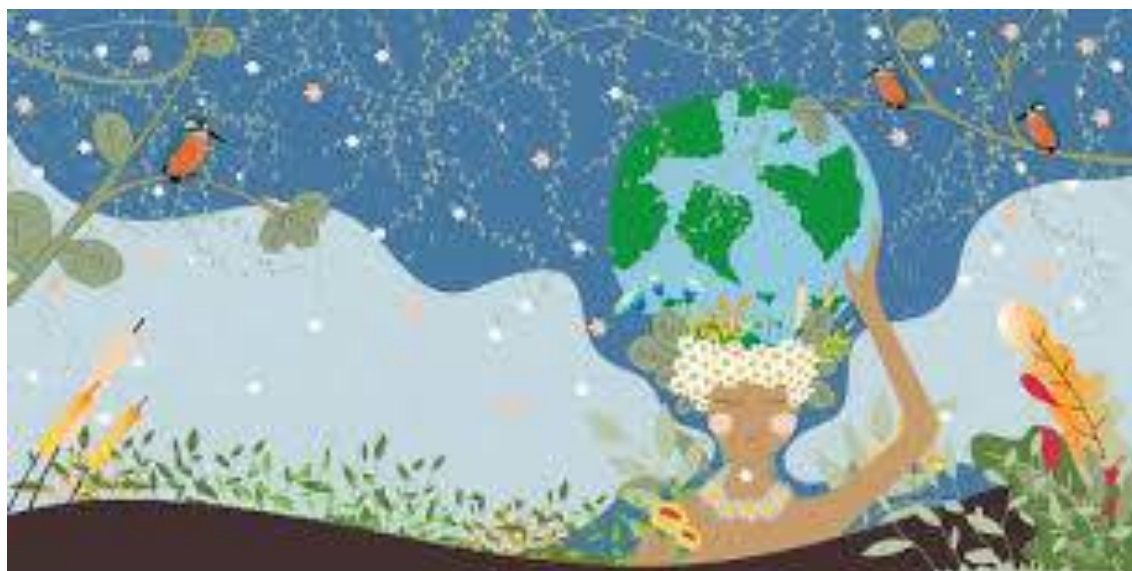
International Day of Peasant Struggle

Hundreds of thousands of people, male and female, across the globe in rural and peri-urban areas have remembered this day since 1996 when 19 members of the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil were gunned down while marching peacefully for their rights. Over the centuries, peasant communities and indigenous peoples have been subjected to domination and exploitation, with imposed crops, crippling taxes, land grabs, forced eviction, violence and harassment. They have been enslaved, demeaned, as

well as denied education and knowledge – the list is long and justice sparse. Today they also face the challenges of global warming and pandemics. In response, peasant and indigenous communities struggle in diverse ways for their rights and resources, lives and livelihoods. While current legal instruments, policies and laws are not enough to protect peasants and rural workers from ongoing systemic discrimination and abuses, a turning point was reached in 2018 when the United Nations adopted the [Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas](#).

The Declaration recognizes the additional demands faced by women, who “are often denied tenure and ownership of land, equal access to land, productive resources, financial services, information, employment or social protection, and are often victims of violence and discrimination in a variety of forms and manifestations.” The Declaration also recognizes that women play a significant role in the economic survival of their families, in contributing to the rural and national economy, conserving and improving biodiversity, and ensuring the right to adequate food and food security.

“Having a dedicated day that highlights our daily struggles throughout the year is important, so we can come together to remember those we have lost in the struggle and renew our commitment to keep up the struggle,” says Elizabeth Mpofu, co-founder of the African Women’s Collaborative. “Equally important is having a day dedicated to Mother Earth, since our struggle is intimately bound with the struggles of Mother Earth to be free of exploitation and misuse.”



African peasant, indigenous and pastoralist women have a spiritual and custodial relationship with Mother Earth that is richer and more vibrant than the narrow role imposed on them by centuries of exploitation and impoverishment as agricultural workers.

Linkages between Mother Earth and Peasant Rights

The African Women’s Collaborative works to support the advancements of rural women in Africa, as well as restore the dignity and fruits of Mother Earth for today’s generation and that of the future.

[International Mother Earth Day](#) is an opportunity to highlight the issues and call for action to shift to more sustainable local economies and food systems that work for all peoples and the planet.

Mother Earth Day was adopted by the United Nations in 2009 to include the word ‘Mother’ after more than 40 years of advocacy and organizing by Indigenous Peoples and environmental movements. Indigenous and peasant cultures show great reverence for Mother Earth and have played a leading role in drawing attention to the destruction of Mother Earth’s natural resources. At the highest level, governments today recognize that the most grievous challenges for Mother Earth and rural peoples are

man-made and artificial. Nature is suffering from criminal acts that disrupt biodiversity and threaten the ecosystems that support life on Earth - particularly deforestation, mineral extraction, land-use change, and intensified agriculture using chemical inputs. Oceans are filling with plastic and becoming more acidic which is killing life. Millions of people are displaced each year due to environmental degradation, man-made hunger, and land takeovers, with women and children put at greatest risk.

To help stem the tide of destruction, the African Women's Collaborative has brought together [peasant, indigenous and pastoralist women leaders](#) and their organizations in a Pan-African initiative to identify the most nutritious food crops regularly grown by women, to increase knowledge about them, distribute local seeds and expand production. In Zambia, women farmers in three Districts - Ndola/Luanshya, Chingola, and Lufwanyama - are growing maize, beans and pumpkin for home consumption and the market place. Efforts are being made to monitor the germination of the seeds, to ensure viable seeds for planting the following year, and to improve the nutrition of families. A workshop is planned for women farmers, nutritionists and government officers, including a representative of Zambia's Food Reserve Agency. Key to the success of the project is rural women's ability to communicate their needs and plans to decision-makers so that they have access land, seed, water, equipment, credit and markets as fundamental to peasant rights.

"It's encouraging that rural women's movements are on [the rise in Southern Africa](#)," says Grace Tepula, Chairperson of the Rural Women's Assembly, Zambia chapter, who has been leading the women's seeds project in Zambia. "We would like to see more rural women - especially young women - advocating for resilient interventions to support their farming and leading trainings on the nutritional and medicinal properties of foods grown from local seeds."





Photographs courtesy of Rural Women's Assembly, UK Natural Resources Institute, ZIMSOF

Grace's Story

Grace Tepula (Steering Committee member of the African Women's Collaborative and Chairperson of the Rural Women's Assembly, Zambia chapter) in her demonstration plot of edible pumpkins grown from seed saved by women farmers.

Pumpkins are a very versatile and nutritious food. Their young leaves can be eaten fresh or dried for later use, and are high in Vitamin A and C. Pumpkin seeds have many [health benefits](#), and can be easily dried and stored. The flesh of the pumpkin is rich in antioxidants and Vitamin A and can be made into soups, stews and pies. Pumpkin is an important part of people's diets across Africa.

Along with squash, the pumpkin belongs to the gourd family. First grown in Central America some 7500 years ago, it's unknown when the pumpkin arrived in Africa but it has become an important part of [African culture with a long history](#) that includes the development of instruments made from dried gourds. Most famous is the *kora* of West Africa. Watch [Sona Jobarteh](#), the first female professional *kora* player to come from a griot family.

***“They are the gods themselves
that white-wash the fruits
of the pumpkins.”***

– Nigerian proverb

Are you an African woman from a pastoralist, peasant or indigenous background?
We invite you to share your story at africanfoodsystems.org/stories

We'd love to hear from you!