



Saving Seeds

Seeds are our Pride

2024

A four-part series by the



Intro:

WhyHunger's Food Justice Voices series was created to support and amplify the voices of people working to regain control of their communities' food system. This Food Justice Voices series from the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA), a self-organised network or alliance of rural women in the SADC, uplifts the stories of struggle and resilience of women on the front lines of food sovereignty, the climate crisis, land rights, feminism and seed saving. Click [here](#) to view this multi-part series.

About The Rural Women's Assembly:

The Rural Women's Assembly (RWA) is a self-organised network or alliance of national rural women's movements, assemblies, grassroots organisations and chapters of mixed peasant unions, federations and movements across ten countries in the SADC region. Since 2009, we have gathered together poor, rural women into regional Rural Women's Assemblies; into international platforms coinciding with major multi-lateral events, such as COP 17 and Rio +20; and into regional lobbying processes that have run parallel to SADC meetings, as well. National chapters of the RWA have also organised their own lobbying events and activities to coincide with important national meetings, summits and on international days, such as International Rural Women's Day and International Women's Day.

Learn more:

<https://ruralwomensassembly.wordpress.com/> and
<https://www.seeds-savers.org/>



Women are the custodians of seeds,”

says activist farmer and seed guardian Mary Sakala from Zambia. Mary is on a mission to “save and share” Indigenous and traditional seeds to preserve the wide variety of local seeds and protect biodiversity in her area.

Using agroecology, Mary practises integrated mixed farming with crops such as local cereals, legumes and vegetables, together with livestock such as goats, chicken and cows. Mary saves the seeds of and grows diverse crops including, but not limited to, Gankanta maize, Hamponga red maize, Kafwamba maize, Solontoni, Kadononga groundnuts, Kabulangeti beans, Kampepa Milomo beans and Mbala beans.

Historically, rural women have been the guardians of seeds, Indigenous food knowledge and food systems for centuries. In Zambia, when relocating or if forced to migrate, rural women would create “special carriers made of clay pot and chinkuli to store seeds and used cow dung to keep seed safe”.^[1]



Seeds are very often shared with friends and relatives who are starting a new household and form part of important traditional ceremonies such as marriage ceremonies when brides are gifted seeds.^[2]

“Seeds are under threat, as they are now identified as a business,” says Mary who is worried about how multinational corporations (MNC) are endangering seed sovereignty. Currently, it is a handful of MNCs and other seed companies who dominate seed breeding. Where seeds come from, how seeds have traditionally been accessed is being erased. In recent decades, the false narrative that traditional seeds are inferior and have less value has unfortunately become too common. But it is rural African women who have been ensuring the safe passage of seeds through the centuries from grandmother, mother to daughter on the African Continent. “Perhaps they thought what we have is not nutritious enough. Then they took advantage, so that is the biggest threat that comes in with some policies to say that our seeds are no longer productive,” says Mary.

Parallel to the ever-increasing corporate control of seeds in Africa, hunger is deepening. Most rural households in Zambia depend on their own produce to survive.



Saving seeds is a crucial part of realising food justice, enabling easy access to nutritious food, better household food security and food sovereignty. The price of commercial seeds keeps escalating making food in general more expensive. Mary is skeptical of the quality of commercial seeds explaining that, “unfortunately, you find that the seeds which are being bred are prone to diseases. They are so costly.”

A growing number of agricultural policies and legislation is at best discouraging and at worst





criminalising seed sharing. It is also adversely affecting rural women's ability to produce food and has had a disastrous effect on local food systems. Commercial players with deep pockets and lobbying power often unduly influence agricultural policy. In Kenya, farmers face jail time for sharing Indigenous seeds without certification. "Our rights of saving seeds have been taken away and I think it's high time we demanded our rights. These guys have power. If we say power, it means that they have money," says Mary.

"They come up with policies that are throwing away our sovereignty so that we remain people who depend on them, so that they continue making money for them. It's profits," she continues. The free exchange of local seeds ensures a vibrant local food system. "This is why we encourage women to continue keeping the seeds and saving them so that we continue maintaining the cultural eating, we continue maintaining our sovereignty," Mary explains.

Movements such as the Southern Africa Rural Women's Assembly (RWA), of which Mary is a member, together with civil society organisations are advocating for farmers rights within the framework of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of

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Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) which allows farmers to use, save and share their Indigenous seed.

Mary warns that “nowadays, there are very few people who teach their young ones about Indigenous food. Some of them have never even seen a crop!” Defending the commons has been central to the work of the Southern Africa Rural Women’s Assembly which is guided by the motto, “We are the Guardians of Land, Life, Seeds and Love.” The movement is deeply concerned that the wealth of indigenous knowledge about seeds, crops, nutrition, medicines, biodiversity, ecosystems, climate change and more, is on the verge of being lost.

In response, the Rural Women’s Assembly embarked on a Feminist Participatory Action Research (PAR) process in SADC seven countries to review and document the Indigenous and local farmers’ seeds which members of the Rural Women’s Assembly

have in their possession. Starting in 2020 the audit was conducted in remote rural villages with over 600 seed savers over the course of 20 months. Mary formed part of the seed research conducted in Central, Southern, Copperbelt and Lusaka provinces in Zambia. The process was not just about cataloguing the variety of seeds which RWA members are saving, it was also about making visible the key role rural women play in defending seed sovereignty.

Together with RWA members from across ten countries in SADC region, Mary forms part of intensifying RWA’s regional campaign to protect and promote seed sovereignty. “We need to continue sharing, we need to continue to fight for our rights, we need to lobby our government so that we have favourable policies that will allow women to utilize the seeds that we have,” she adds. Mary concludes that seeds are “our right, it is our pride!”. ■

[1] Rural Women’s Assembly (2023) *Participatory Action Research Report: The Seed Journey of the Southern African Rural Women’s Assembly*. Rural Women’s Assembly.

[2] Ibid



**We are the Guardians of
Land, Life, Seeds and Love.”**





Rural Women's Assembly

Guardians of Land, Life, Seed and Love.

Learn more:

<https://ruralwomensassembly.wordpress.com/>
and <https://www.seeds-savers.org/>



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Food Justice **Voices**