

WOMEN AS CUSTODIANS OF SEED

Women have been plant breeders and seed producers throughout agricultural history. In many rural African societies women are the custodians of seed systems. Selecting and preserving seeds from harvests for further development, exchange and re-planting, they play a central role in ensuring food security, the resilience and stability of their crops and the diversity of their seed.



Women deal with crops that have minor commercial value but are key to household nutrition and food security. They include sorghum, millet, groundnuts, cassava, cowpea and green leafy vegetables such as amaranth, gourd, pumpkin and cassava leaves, and nightshade.

However, when farmers are pressurised into growing commercial seed from the formal sector, women are unable to continue with this age-old practice of selecting and preserving their seeds. They are now expected to buy expensive certified seed every year and grow hybrid seed in monocultures. In addition, they have to buy costly agro-chemicals and fertilisers that are used together with certified seed. This leads to debt and dependence and severely undermines the role of women as custodians of seed.

