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Global Donor Platform for Rural Development
Tackling rural poverty, together

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SUMMARY

The economic empowerment of women farmers, livestock keepers, fisherfolk, processors, and traders is critical to the creation of effective and efficient agricultural programmes and policies. Decades of research demonstrate that women play a major role in food and farming in developing countries. Currently, the proportion of women in production and post-harvest processing ranges from 20% to 70% and their involvement is increasing in many countries^[1]. Across the developing world, rural women are important contributors to household welfare and food security, and they supply local, regional and international markets with a wide range of goods.

Although agriculture has the potential to lift people out of poverty, the agricultural sector in general, and support to women in agriculture in particular, has suffered from years of under-investment. In Sub-Saharan Africa for instance, overseas development assistance to agriculture amounts to only 4% of total spending, and public spending on agriculture averages 5-7%^[2]. Spending on addressing the specific needs of women within these totals forms a tiny percentage^[3]. Yet gender inequalities directly result in poorer agricultural and human development outcomes. A study conducted in four African countries showed that providing women farmers with the same quantity and quality of inputs that men typically receive, and improving their access to agricultural education, could increase national agricultural output and incomes by an estimated 10-20 per cent^[4]. Furthermore, occupational segregation by gender, for instance in value chains and contract farming, can impose significant costs over the long-term. The market's ability to respond to change is significantly reduced through the under-utilisation of women's labour, weak human capacity development, and lower levels of output and growth^[5].

Paying attention to gender issues in farming can increase production and productivity, speed up the adoption of innovations, raise household incomes, and ensure significant improvements to child health, nutrition and educational levels, thus contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Investing in women farmers, and increasing their effective participation in rural organisations, enhances the potential of agriculture to become an agent of sustainable social change^[6, 7].

A gender approach addresses the challenges that women and men face in a given situation. It develops opportunities to ensure that both women and men maximize their work potential, can realise their business plans, and benefit equally. As farmers of the future, the needs of boys and girls in farming households need special policy attention in order to encourage them to stay in the sector.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Gender in Agriculture Source-book is a collaborative production of the Agriculture and Rural Development Department of the World Bank, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). See www.worldbank.org/genderinag

The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11: Women in agriculture: closing the gender gap for development is published on 7 March 2011 www.fao.org/publications/sofa/en Print copies of SOFA 2010-11 can be ordered from:
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WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE^[8]

Women are major players in agriculture:

- Agricultural growth, a key means of poverty alleviation, relies on improving the production and productivity of women farmers since women form the majority of farmers and labourers in many countries.
- Women produce most of the food that is consumed locally and are mainly responsible for household food security in many rural areas.
- Women's income is known to impact strongly upon poverty alleviation. Improving women's agricultural productivity directly helps to increase household productivity, improve rural livelihoods, and leads to wider economic growth and poverty reduction.

However,

- The productivity of women farmers is seriously constrained by their weak access to inputs, productive resources and services.
- Compared to men, women have much weaker property rights and tenure security. This restricts their membership and thus their influence in water-user associations, farmer associations, producer credit associations, and community-based natural resource management groups, which often demand secure land rights.
- Women are poorly represented in the leadership in rural organisations, particularly at regional and national level. This results in a dramatic disproportion between their huge contribution to agriculture, and their poor ability to influence policy.
- Due to their greater vulnerability and greater exposure to risk, women lack incentives to invest. Their access to collateral is limited by their lack of assets.
- Women entrepreneurs who succeed in establishing a profitable niche in value chains often find it expropriated by men.

ANALYSIS

Concern about the ability of the world's ecosystems to continue supporting human life on earth is resulting in a renewed attentiveness to agriculture. In 2008 three major publications reported on the need to focus policy attention on food and farming^[9]. One finding of all three reports, supported by decades of research, is that developing gender-centred policies will ensure higher production and productivity in agriculture, and generate a large number of social benefits.

However, there is a serious mismatch between research findings and policy and strategy development. Policies and programmes still fail to tackle the obstacles to women's effective participation in the agricultural sector. Women still find it difficult to participate and shape discussions about programme design and policy-making in food and farming. In many countries, policies address the needs of male farmers by default and expect women to 'opt-in' to agricultural packages geared essentially to male interests.

Yet reality has sprung way ahead. In many countries, men are walking away from farming, particularly when it seems 'unprofitable'^[10]. This said, many men have failed to establish viable alternative livelihoods to farming. The 'femini-

sation' of smallholder farming in some countries^[11] is transforming gender roles. Increasingly, rural women are becoming de facto heads of household and chief farmers. Whilst this can present opportunities, labour scarcities and gender-related difficulties in accessing productive assets such as oxen for ploughing is resulting in huge productive and household maintenance workloads for some women. Likewise, export-orientated irrigated farming is associated with female labour particularly in the lower echelons. Whilst women may benefit from being paid for their work, the risks to their health from pesticides is frequently high and progression to higher management tiers may be very difficult^[12, 13 14].

Women's gender needs in farming include human capital development and gender-sensitive extension, strengthened access to productive resources and to markets, assistance with ensuring food security, and an equal voice in household expenditure decisions. Whilst these topics are treated separately here, the key point is that all these needs depend on one another for their realisation. For instance, lack of secure land tenure often means women cannot offer collateral for loans, cannot join user associations and thus cannot take part in decision-making processes. Equally, lack of security in land tenure may reduce incentives to invest in improving the land, frequently resulting in



Village women with their livestock

Photo: ILRI / Stevie Mann

lower productivity. Evidence also suggests that there are strong links between secure access to land and food security^[15].

// Human Capital

Low levels of human capital - measured in years of schooling, health, and nutritional status - constrain poor rural women in their multiple roles as agricultural producers, workers, mothers, and caregivers. Their unpaid household maintenance roles consume considerable time, resulting in little time for travelling, training, taking up paid employment, developing businesses, and processing and marketing their produce. Women's lack of literacy and numeracy in many countries prevents them from developing effective negotiation skills with value chain actors, and using modern communication technologies to support decision-making.

Ensuring that women farmers are better educated and thus able to take better advantage of extension, business development services, market opportunities and overall life choices begins with investments in young girls' schooling. One approach is to develop financial incentives to keep young girls in school, for example through conditional cash transfers. These are often targeted to mothers and aim to increase investments in child schooling, health, and nutrition^[16]. Other measures include encouraging the adoption of labour-saving devices such as improved cook-stoves, local water pumps and better agricultural tools to remove the need for girls' labour at home. Promoting female role models as teachers and scientists is important. Winning male support for girls' education, particularly from leaders, can be vital, and separate girls' boarding and sanitary facilities may be essential to win community acceptance. Girls should be encouraged to study maths and science from primary level

onwards if they are to make a career in the agricultural sector. The care burden that falls to women - tending children, caring for elderly and disabled people, and people with HIV/AIDS and other illnesses - can severely limit agricultural production. Alleviating the burden through labour-saving agricultural techniques, improved local health facilities, and sharing the burden of care can be achieved through close work with the Ministry of Health, agricultural research stations, and community dialogue processes

// Technology Research and Development (R&D)

Women's roles in seed handling, agricultural production, food processing, trading and purchase are essential to food security and family well-being. These roles, and the knowledge on which they are based, can be substantially different to those of men. Although women acutely need income-generating, labour-saving and productivity-increasing technologies, gender issues remain to be properly incorporated into technology development. For example, women need to be fully involved in plant varietal selection and participatory plant breeding programmes to make sure their gender needs are recognised in crop development. These are often very different to those of men: women may consider ease of processing, cooking and taste as key traits, whereas men may consider ease of storage and abundant foliage for feeding livestock to be more important^[17]. Furthermore, women's farming is typically handicapped by poor or no technology. Machinery and tools that can easily be handled by women, such as long-handled hoes, light sprayers, and treadle pumps, need to be disseminated. Women need training in tractor usage and ploughing.

// Access to, and Control over, Key Productive Assets

Women are disadvantaged in many statutory and customary land tenure systems. They often have weak property and contractual rights to land, water, and other natural resources. Even where legislation may be in place to strengthen women's property rights, lack of legal knowledge and weak implementation often limits the ability of women to exercise their rights^[19]. Interventions are needed to strengthen knowledge of formal land rights. Within customary systems, the development of women's capacity to negotiate better access to, and control over, assets such as land, livestock and water, is essential. Traditional leaders, and men more generally, need to be sensitized to the benefits of strengthening women's assets and decision-making capacity and to understand that they too will benefit through increases in household and community well-being. With regard to female-headed households, measures to enable them to gain title or use-rights to land, and to have access to technology to work that land, is essential.

Due to their different productive and reproductive responsibilities, men and women may have different priorities for how water is used. Water projects that can help women meet their farming and business needs are more appropriate than projects focused on domestic water supplies alone. The criteria for accessing water through irrigation schemes need to be formulated carefully to ensure the most poor, and women, can benefit^[19].

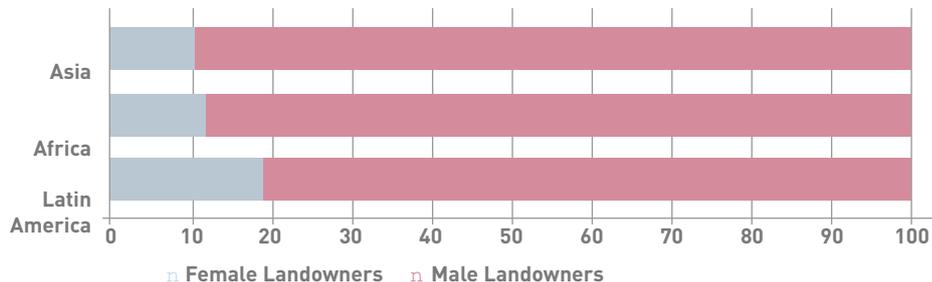
Financial services are essential to the ability of women to realise their business plans and increase productivity on the farm. However, the ability of women to obtain credit and other financial services, including savings and insurance, is frequently restricted. This is due to their limited education and mobility, social and cultural barriers, and the nature of women's businesses, which are typically concentrated in low-return sectors such as food preparation. Female lack of ownership of key assets

restricts their ability to obtain collateral. In some cultures customs prevent women from receiving information direct from outside lenders - an important consideration if husbands do not fully convey information to their wives. Furthermore, the role of women as primary caregivers leads to intermittency in employment. All these factors make it difficult for women to graduate to the formal financial sector and so the majority remain confined to small, informal micro-credit schemes. Institutions are needed that ensure information and access is available to all^[20].

// Access to Markets

Due to the feminisation of farming in some areas, and changing norms, women increasingly supply national and international markets with traditional and high-value niche produce. However, women farmers and entrepreneurs face gender-specific disadvantages and receive fewer services than those owned by men^[21]. These include lower and sometimes no mobility which forces them to use intermediaries to market their goods, and less access to market information resulting in weak bargaining power vis-à-vis other actors. Limited control over expenditure decisions in male-headed households reduces incentives for women to engage in high-value agriculture. The multiple demands on women's time and low access to technologies often result in poor post-harvest processing, thus reducing crop value even before it leaves the farm^[22]. Furthermore, location in the commodity chain matters. Women generally remain concentrated at the production end of the chain, finding it harder than men to carve out new roles in value chains. Moreover men frequently take over production and marketing - even of traditional 'women's crops' - when it becomes financially lucrative to do so^[23, 24]. All these constraints reduce women's effectiveness as actors in value chains, as well as reducing overall agricultural and market effectiveness.

// Share of male and female landowners in main developing regions



Source: The State of Food and Agriculture 2010 – 2011, Women in agriculture: closing the gender gap for development. FAO, Rome.

// Food Security

All too often agricultural development programmes focus on production for the market and neglect food security. However, in 2010, 925 million people were unable to meet their daily food needs^[26]. Resource degradation, climate change, alterations in dietary preferences, the development of biofuels, and population growth pose serious sustainability and productivity challenges^[26]. Part of the solution requires policy recognition of the centrality of women to food security and nutrition. However, men should be targeted too. The Agricultural Support Programme in Zambia trained farmers to calculate their annual food needs using internationally agreed standards, and both women and men shared responsibility for household food security^[27].

Many programmes work to improve household nutritional practice, for example when people have HIV/AIDs. Far fewer programmes work to combat gendered food distribution practices in the household, which often work to deny women and children protein-rich food. Yet worldwide more than half of all child deaths, and a fifth of maternal deaths, are associated with malnutrition. Key actions include stepping up pro-

grammes to ensure gender-equitable food distribution, alongside programmes to improve the vitamin content of staple crops^[28].

// Agricultural Extension

The foregoing text demonstrates that extension takes place in complex environments structured a priori by gender relations. This affects the ability of extension staff to deliver their messages to the person responsible for a particular task or crop/animal, meaning that much of their work is ineffective. The organisation of extension is generally based on male needs and is the product of male-dominated organisations. It rarely recognises women's time burdens, and different time schedules from men. In many cultures, the lack of female extension workers is a major constraint, particularly given the fact that male extension workers often find it difficult to reach women due to social norms that may prohibit female interaction with non-family men^[29].

Extension work with women must include efforts to develop their voice at household and community level, to ensure that they benefit properly from the fruits of their labour. Mobile phones and other information communication technologies (ICT's) promote women's access to technical and market information.

▶ POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

// Address the Needs of Women and Men in Agriculture

- National policies and strategies on rural development, food security and growth need to have clear targets on gender equality.
- Strategies for the smallholder sector should focus on enabling women and men to develop and implement a business plan for their farm which factors in both food security and market production. This needs to be complemented by programmes addressing gendered biases in nutrition where relevant.
- Analyses which deliver an understanding of the key gender issues in the language planners understand will assist in the formulation of responses able to address specific conditions, constraints and opportunities.
- Gender-disaggregated data and analysis are essential to improve the targeting of investments. To achieve this, capacity development of statistics offices may be necessary.
- Since gender is a cross-cutting issue a portfolio of interventions aimed at tackling different aspects of gender inequality in the agricultural sector are needed. To achieve this, Ministries of Agriculture need to work in tandem with other ministries, such as the Ministries of Water, Livestock, Energy, Health, Education, Roads, and Land.
- Gender mainstreaming strategies need to include men as part of a package addressing the economic inefficiencies that derive from the unequal power relationships between women and men. Family and couple approaches work well in many situations.
- In those situations where gender inequalities affect particular categories of men, such as junior men, strategies need to be developed which address their needs whilst simultaneously strengthening those of women.
- Cross-cutting issues such as age, ethnicity and poverty levels should be examined in association with a gender analysis to ensure programmes are properly tailored to everyone's needs.
- Best practice case studies of programmes which have been effective in tackling unequal decision-making patterns in the household over how to share out the gains of women's work should be upscaled.

// Devise Women-Centred Strategies

- Strategies which specifically address the needs of various categories of women farmers are needed to complement mainstreaming strategies. Female-headed households require a different approach than programmes for women in male-headed households due to differences in decision-making capacity, control over income, and access to assets.
- Special programmes are needed to build secure assets for women including in live-stock, land and machinery. Land titling and other activities to ensure secure land tenure must be made gender-aware and be designed to ensure secure land tenure and increase access to women in both statutory and customary land tenure systems. Strategies to enable women to access the inputs and services needed to cultivate their land effectively are critical.
- To benefit from market-based opportunities, technical assistance and resources must take into account the specific priorities and needs of women. Institutions and policies need to explicitly favour working with women farmer groups in value chains.

// Strengthen Women's Voice and Collective Action

- The participation and influence of rural women in user groups, producer organisations, service providers, governing boards and in policy making bodies should be strongly promoted at all levels. This can be achieved by developing women's leadership skills and through quota schemes in mixed gender organisations. Women-only groups also need support.

// Improve Agricultural Extension

- Extension services need to work with the whole household, rather than with individuals in that household. When the systemic interdependence of women and men's work is explicitly recognised, the whole farm is strengthened as a productive enterprise. Furthermore, working with the whole household enables women in male-headed households to be targeted; such women can be among the hardest to reach.
- Given that many community-level dialogue processes are male dominated, women often request women-only spaces to strengthen their voice and learn effectively.
- Empowerment gains are more likely when extension providers and farmers create their learning platforms together. Recognizing and alleviating constraints to learning, such as illiteracy and lack of time, help women to develop their abilities.

- Recruiting and training female extension workers, particularly in areas where cultural norms restrict male-female interaction, can increase women's participation in extension activities and their adoption of new technologies.
- Both women and men extension workers need training on gender issues in farming.
- Integration of ICT's in agricultural extension can improve women's access to these services.

// Ensure Research and Development is Relevant to Women Farmers

- Women farmers must be seen as sources of information as well as recipients. Women should participate actively in R&D to ensure appropriateness, and to ensure that their existing traditional and local knowledge in the production of food and the conservation of biodiversity is utilised.
- Agricultural research must focus on the technical needs of women farmers through working on crops and livestock important to them.
- The development and dissemination of labour-saving devices to reduce the burden of work in the home and on the farm is critical to enable women to use their time more productively.
- The capacity of institutions and NGOs to understand women's changing forms of involvement in farming should be strengthened.

// Ensure Agricultural Institutions Deliver for Women and Men

- Recruiting women professionals into the agricultural sector starts with primary school. Measures to make mathematics and science attractive to girls and their families are essential. Curricula at agricultural colleges should teach students gender issues in farming, and prepare students for a variety of careers in agriculture, including 'women-friendly' careers, such as food processing and management, as well as high-level scientific work.
- It is essential to ensure gender balance in agricultural decision-making at all levels. Policies to develop women staff in agricultural institutions need to address recruitment, training, career development, sexual harassment, supportive infrastructure (e.g. child-care) and possibly create quotas for women in all tiers.
- Staff in agriculture-related institutions need dedicated budgets for gender mainstreaming. Reliance on gender focal points is not enough. Organisations as well as individuals must be made accountable for outcomes on gender equality in their job descriptions. Top leadership commitment to gender is vital.

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