



## AGRICULTURE FOR DEVELOPMENT POLICY BRIEF

# Agriculture for Development: The Gender Dimensions

*The design of many development policies continues to assume wrongly that farmers and rural workers are men. The important role of women in agriculture in many parts of the world calls for urgent attention to gender-specific constraints in agricultural production and marketing. Mainstreaming gender in agricultural policies and programs is essential for development success.*

Women play major, but largely unrecognized, roles in agriculture in most countries of the world. Failure to recognize their roles is costly—it results in misguided policies and programs, forgone agricultural output and associated income flows, higher levels of poverty, and food and nutrition insecurity.

In many societies, access by women to resources and participation in agriculture is mediated through their fathers or husbands. As daughters or wives, they are part of a complex web of interactions entailing both cooperation and power plays, as households design livelihood strategies to map a pathway out of poverty. These livelihood strategies adapt to suit the women's asset endowments and account for the constraints imposed by market failures, state failures, social norms, and exposures to uninsured risks. Every aspect of these strategies has gender dimensions, whether through the different asset and opportunity sets of men and women, the constraints that men and women operate under, or the design of policies that set the household context in which the strategy is implemented. A woman's negotiating power is affected by her participation in economic activity, which itself depends on her asset endowment (including human capital) and her access to and control of the household's assets.

## Women face constraints in using the pathways out of poverty.

In the drive to escape poverty, households pursue three pathways: farming, labor, and migration. Rarely, though, is any one pathway an exclusive strategy. Within households, men and women have different opportunities to pursue these pathways. Social norms often dictate that most of the childrearing, cooking, and household chores be responsibilities of women, thereby limiting women's mobility and potential to take advantage of new economic opportunities and reinforcing inequalities. Increased labor force participation by women, combined with those traditional roles at home, can mean much longer workdays for women than for men.

Enabling women to move beyond subsistence production and into higher-value and market-oriented production is an important element of successful agriculture for development strategies. Women, more than men, spend their income on food, thus improving household food and nutrition security and particularly the development of children. In Guatemala, the amount spent on food in households whose profits from nontraditional agricultural exports were controlled by women was double that of households in which men controlled the profits.

## Farming is a key pathway for women, facilitated by better access to resources.

The farming pathway is key for many women because their mobility is constrained and thus migration or external labor markets are limited options. But their role can be restricted to subsistence food crops with low potential to generate higher incomes. Compared with men, women face a number of costly constraints, ranging from lower wages for agricultural work to lack of access to land, working capital, technology, and marketing channels.

**Unrealized agriculture growth potential.** A study in southern Ghana found that soil fertility, tenure security of plots, and participation in credit markets were lower for women than for men. Consequently, women were much less likely than men to plant pineapples, a profitable export crop. Evidence from Burkina Faso suggests that overall output of crops grown by the household could increase by 6 percent if some labor and fertilizer were reallocated within the household from men's to women's plots.

**Access to resources.** Women are less likely than men to own land, and even when they do own land, their landholdings are smaller. This inequality is driven by unfavorable marital and inheritance laws, family and community norms, and unequal access to markets. In Uganda, women account for the largest share of agricultural production but own just 5 percent of the land, and often they have insecure tenure rights on the land they farm.

Land titling programs in many countries have often reinforced men's land rights, but during the past decade, many African countries have adopted new land laws to strengthen women's land rights, to recognize customary tenure, and to make lesser forms of evidence (such as oral evidence) on land rights admissible. From 2003 to 2005, Ethiopia issued certificates to about 6 million households (18 million plots), which documented inheritable land-use rights of both the husband and wife jointly, while still restricting market transfers. More than 80 percent of evaluation survey respondents indicated that certification improved women's situations.

**Wage discrimination undermines women's participation in the labor force.** Barriers to land rental can be particularly costly to women. In India, the marginal product of one day of labor in agricultural self-cultivation is equal for men and women at Rs 150. Daily wages in the casual labor market, however, are Rs 34 for women compared with Rs 46 for men. This discrimination in casual labor markets makes renting land particularly attractive for women.



**Gender equality fosters growth.** As with the distribution of land rights, inequality is often embedded in the distribution of water rights, with the rights of women controlled by their husbands. Women are often excluded from building and maintaining irrigation works, a common way for users to obtain rights in the scheme. And women tend to have less power in decisions by water users associations, even if they are members. Increasing the access of women to irrigated land and water and recognizing their role as irrigators and decision makers have raised agricultural productivity and strengthened women's negotiating power over use of water.

Women's participation in community organizations that manage the natural resources on which agriculture depends can improve the effectiveness of the organizations. Survey results of 33 rural programs in 20 countries found higher levels of collaboration, solidarity, and conflict resolution in community organizations that included women.

**Access to markets and services.** Women's agriculture can be commercialized with careful attention to underlying gender roles. Some ways to assist in this process include improving women's access to services such as agricultural extension and finance and to technology such as improved seeds or female-specific farming implements. Other ways involve improving women's agricultural wages and linking women to modern value chains from which they are normally excluded.

A focus on particular commodities can often benefit women. In eastern, central, and southern Africa, nearly 10 million farmers, mostly women, are reportedly growing and consuming new bean varieties (*Phaseolus vulgaris*), many with multiple stress resistances. Cassava, widely grown by women and traditionally viewed as a subsistence food crop, is enjoying a renaissance with use extending beyond food. In Ghana, the Sustainable Uptake of Cassava as an Industrial Commodity Project established systems linking farmers, especially women, to new markets for cassava products, such as flour, baking products, and plywood adhesives.

The rapidly developing high-value agriculture sector—particularly emerging global supply chains (vegetables, fruit, and flowers) and fast expanding supermarkets in developing countries—has had important effects on women. Those activities generate considerable employment through production (about twice the labor input per hectare for cereal production) and more off-farm jobs in processing, packaging, and marketing. Women dominate the more numerous casual and temporary manual labor jobs in the subsector, with men dominant in the management stream. The labor regulatory framework is important to ensure that women are protected both from wage and opportunity discrimination and from unsafe work environments.

## Labor and migration are pathways enhanced by women's education and training.

Although women may have greater mobility constraints, particularly when they are wives and mothers, off-farm work is important for them, employing 25 percent of rural adult females in East Asia, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America. In East Asia and Latin America, women participate more often in the rural nonfarm economy than in the agricultural wage labor market. However, in South Asia the reverse is true. In Sub-Saharan Africa, women, particularly poor women, rely increasingly on agricultural wage labor.

Evidence from Brazil indicates that rural men and women under 20 to 25 years old were most likely to migrate, with the rate being higher for women. Migration rates were also positively correlated with education

levels. This pattern may be different in poorer countries, where women's education rates are still a distant second to men's.

Active labor market programs can help rural women and men find better employment opportunities. A job-matching program for migrants in China provided off-farm employment to about 200,000 upland laborers during six years. Although women composed only 25 percent of the migrants, they reported more self-esteem and confidence, reduced work burdens (on returning to their home villages), and greater economic independence.

## Mainstreaming gender in agriculture-for-development programs.

Clearly, if agriculture is to be an effective sector for development, women need to be able to fully participate. That step requires action across a broad swathe of the policy and institutional domains. Governments will need not only to advocate but also to legislate and demonstrate gender mainstreaming in national and local governance.

Government action should ensure that legislation does not discriminate against women in areas such as inheritance, wages, property ownership, divorce, and contracting. A first stage is auditing all existing laws for discrimination.

Women have traditionally been excluded from many avenues of governance, whether in local user groups, producer organizations, local councils, or national government. Women need to be engaged at far more senior levels than is generally the case—in scientific research, in ministries of agriculture, and in local government. Women, for example, make up just 18 percent of African agricultural scientists. Internal reforms, including affirmative action for women, are required to increase female representation in ministries of agriculture and in local government. Such reforms should include action plans that set time-bound goals and mechanisms that ensure accountability. Training for women needs to provide them with the required skills, particularly in countries where female education levels are low, and to ensure that they are fully conversant with their roles and accountabilities. In India, the *panchayati raj* (village councils) reserve seats for women and for members of scheduled castes and tribes. Studies have shown that reserving seats for women increases investment in the type of infrastructure that is relevant to women and that village councils are more effective when gender-sensitivity training is provided to both male and female councilors.

To begin the shift in social norms, governments need to model good practices to the private sector and civil society. They should ensure that public-private contracts for service delivery such as agricultural extension have benchmarks and targets with respect to women's access to service and project participation, with penalty clauses for nonachievement. Decentralization of resource management to user groups, such as user associations to manage water or communities to manage forests, should mandate participation of women. Not only should targets be set, but also reporting should be transparent to enable civil society to monitor target achievement and call for corrective action if progress is not made.

Governments will also need an eye to the future, given women's lower levels of schooling. Ensuring a pipeline of well-qualified female candidates for senior positions in public and private agriculture organizations will require increased emphasis on female education, including incentives such as cash transfers for the education of girls and scholarships for vocational and university training in agriculture sciences and policy.

This policy brief has been extracted from the World Bank's 2008 World Development Report, *Agriculture for Development*. Further information and detailed sources are available in the Report. The Report uses a simple typology of countries based on the contribution of agriculture to overall growth, 1990-2005 and the share of rural poor in the total number of poor (2002 US\$2-a-day level). In agriculture-based countries (mostly Africa), agriculture contributes a significant (>20%) share of overall growth. In transforming countries (mostly in Asia), nonagricultural sectors dominate growth but a great majority of the poor are in rural areas. In urbanized countries (mostly in Latin America and Europe and Central Asia), the largest number of poor people are in urban areas, although poverty rates are often highest in rural areas.