

Advancing rural women's empowerment

Leveraging opportunities to achieve zero hunger



©IFAD/Panos Pictures/Xavier Cerviera

BACKGROUND: GENDERED REALITIES IN THE AGRIFOOD SECTORS

Gender equality and the empowerment of women are prerequisites for the eradication of poverty and hunger. First and foremost, gender inequalities and discrimination represent fundamental violations of the human rights of women. In addition, it is well recognized that gender inequality and discrimination undermine agricultural productivity globally,¹ negatively impact children's health and nutrition,² and erode outcomes across social and economic development indicators.³

Much work on rural women's empowerment has focused on the need to expand women's access to productive resources, which can allow them to increase their productivity. However, much more attention needs to be directed at underlying gender inequalities such as gender-biased institutions, social norms, and customs that negatively impact women's work (paid and unpaid), livelihoods and well-being. Within food systems, these biases manifest themselves in limiting women's access to productive resources, to services (such as finance and training), to commercial opportunities and social protection (including maternity protection). These manifestations may be regarded as symptoms, therefore, rather than drivers, of gender inequality.

Overall, as a result of these inequalities rural women are often blocked from benefiting from emerging opportunities associated with the growing demand for food, greater rural-urban connectivity, increased investment in agriculture and more integrated value chains. Indeed, where gender inequality exists, these trends can actually exacerbate the exclusion of women, especially if barriers to women's access to productive resources and markets cause economic benefits to be skewed towards male household members.

KEY MESSAGES

- Food security and nutrition for all can only be accomplished under conditions of sustainable progress in ensuring the elimination of all forms of gender discrimination and full participation of rural women in all spheres of society – economic, social and political.
- Approaches to empowerment need to be society-wide and transformative, addressing the root causes of gender inequalities, such as gender biased norms and attitudes, institutional and governance structures, and discriminatory practices against women.
- Transformative gender impact requires working at all levels and ensuring women's participation at all decision-making levels – from the household, to community-based organizations, producer organizations, and policy processes from the local to the highest levels of government.

¹ FAO. 2011. *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011: Women in agriculture: Closing the gender gap for development*. Rome, FAO.

² International Food Policy Research Institute. 2016. *Global Nutrition Report 2016: From Promise to Impact: Ending Malnutrition by 2030*. Washington, DC., IFPRI.

³ World Bank. 2011. *World Development Report 2012: Gender equality and development*. Washington D.C., World Bank.

Increased control over resources and income by women has been shown to correlate with improved family health and nutrition. Hence, gender bias and discrimination harms food security and nutrition for families and populations, in addition to violating the rights of women.

ENHANCING RURAL WOMEN'S ACCESS TO PRODUCTIVE RESOURCES, SERVICES AND EMPLOYMENT

Rural women suffer discrimination and inequality in access to productive resources (including technology, machinery and improved seeds), services (especially extension programmes and finance), and employment.⁴ Policy approaches to address these challenges have included laws guaranteeing gender equality in inheritance rights, non-discrimination regulations for employment, initiatives to reduce women's non-economic workload⁵ and cash transfer programmes aimed at women. All of these approaches have merit and have shown positive results in many contexts, though in some cases they have been undermined by persistent underlying barriers that are grounded in specific norms, institutions and organizations at society-wide level. Consequently, these approaches, in isolation, may be largely regarded as treating the symptoms of gender inequality rather than the drivers.

PROMOTING THE PARTICIPATION OF RURAL WOMEN IN SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PROCESSES

Rural women's economic empowerment cannot be sustainable and scalable unless the political and social dimensions are addressed. In particular, decision-making structures – formal and informal – from the household to the highest political levels must encompass the meaningful participation of rural women. Key in this regard will be investing in developing the capacity of women's grassroots organizations and creating spaces for these groups to participate in planning and policy processes, from the local to the national level. Especially important in this regard is the engagement of farmer organizations. The representation of women in leadership positions in these organizations is key to ensuring that their voices are heard and their issues addressed in policy debates (see box 1). Only through the agency of women themselves can inequitable norms and structures be transformed.

A robust women's rights civil society movement linked with political and governance processes is one of the most effective ways to change gender norms and advance the interests of women. Therefore, helping build organizations of rural women, supporting rural women's groups and advocating for their involvement in political processes are priorities. Promoting women's involvement in cooperatives and farmer organizations, especially in leadership positions⁶ through measures like quotas at management level are of particular importance in rural and agricultural contexts. At the household level, awareness campaigns and training that foster reflection on joint livelihood objectives and the roles of women can produce behavioural change and advance more gender-equitable norms (see box 2).

EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES

Despite the increasing availability of data disaggregated by sex, significant gaps remain in indicators on gender equality. Combined with already relatively weak data and information relating to agricultural activities (much of it in the informal sector), rural labour markets, and internal migration patterns from and to rural areas, it is not surprising that the realities facing rural women are neither very visible nor widely understood. As a result, the design of national and local policies and programmes is rarely informed by an analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing rural women. Strategies to improve statistical and data collection systems are needed, in consultation with women's groups.

Of equal importance, monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment of policies, programmes and projects must embed principles of gender equality and rural women's empowerment within systems and indicators. Qualitative tools such as focus group discussions must complement the

⁴ For example, see: World Bank, FAO & IFAD. 2009. *Gender in agriculture sourcebook*. Washington, D.C., World Bank; World Bank. 2007. *Agriculture for development: World Development Report 2008*. Washington, D.C., World Bank.

⁵ For example, see: IFAD. 2016. *Reducing rural women's domestic workload through labour-saving technologies and practices*. Rome, IFAD (Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/documents/10180/c86179dd-ad6d-4622-864a-ed590016250d>).

⁶ FAO and IFAD. 2015. *Promoting the leadership of women in producers' organizations: Lessons from the experience of FAO and IFAD*. Rome, IFAD.

Box 1: The Rural Women's Leadership Programme

In response to demand from women in farmer organizations, and with support from the Government of Norway, IFAD developed the Rural Women's Leadership Programme (RWLP). The overall objective of the RWLP was to strengthen the role and voice of women leaders in rural organizations, including by promoting the participation of representative farmer organizations in policy dialogue.

RWLP is innovative in that it explicitly took on the challenge of reaching out beyond the better-educated women reached by most leadership programmes, and aimed instead to engage with women leaders at the grass roots level. RWLP was implemented in four countries – Madagascar, Nepal, Senegal and the Philippines.

To strengthen the capacity of rural women and their associations, a training-of-trainers approach was adopted, providing a multiplier effect from trainers to women leaders at the district and rural organization level. The training covered not only negotiation skills, confidence building and self-development activities, but also provided technical assistance in natural resource management and other areas relevant to agriculture.

The training helped women leaders and their groups to obtain access to local resources. Sharing and discussing of issues helped build motivation for the creation of women's groups, and having women leaders in these groups proved essential in guiding and supporting other women members. Equally significant, many of these women leaders have gone on to be involved in national women's leadership platforms, with the RWLP linking with complementary initiatives such as the Women's Leadership Circles initiative (see box 3). This has enabled the development of regular dialogue between women policymakers, professionals, farmers and other rural women to make policy more responsive to their needs.

For more information, see:

<https://www.ifad.org/documents/10180/f42cfd2-de62-481f-bdca-718bd606decd>

collection of quantitative information. Some aspects of empowerment, such as participation in decision-making, self-confidence and norms around social institutions, require a degree of elaboration that can rarely be measured in purely quantitative terms. The participation of women in the design and implementation of analysis is needed to ensure that the differences in challenges and opportunities facing women and men are reflected in the design, implementation and review of initiatives at policy and operational levels.

INTEGRATING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT INTO THE INSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL ARCHITECTURE

Gender is a cross-cutting issue. Rural women's empowerment should be reflected in national, sub-national and local institutional frameworks to promote the broad ambitions of the 2030 Agenda. It is essential for policymakers to engage with key elements of the institutional and political architecture working to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and to ensure the adequate representation of rural women therein. National mechanisms for the advancement of women, ministries on gender equality, gender commissions and focal points within the individual ministries should be involved.

Where such mechanisms and apparatus exist, more is required for them to actually lead to the adoption and promotion of enabling policies and investments that empower rural women and improve their livelihoods. There must be effective coordination (vertical and horizontal) with and within relevant ministries and levels of government. Cross-sectoral coordination with ministries of agriculture, rural development, labour and finance must take place. Locating ministries of gender equality at the highest levels of government can help create strong links from the top down through gender commissions, focal points and to the grassroots level through the rural women's civil society movement.

Box 2: Household Methodologies

Household methodologies are participatory approaches - developed by IFAD and partners - that enable family members to work together to improve relations and shared decision-making, and achieve fairer workloads. The methodologies strengthen the overall well-being of the household and empower all its members to realize their potential, thus creating stronger, more resilient and sustainable smallholder farms and rural livelihoods.

The methodologies build on a growing understanding that households are not cohesive units with shared needs, resources, benefits and goals. Rather, women and men in the same household often pursue separate livelihoods and are responsible for different production and consumption activities. Women typically have fewer productive assets than men and also have less autonomy to make independent economic decisions about their enterprises and how the income they generate is used. All too often they are overburdened with productive work, domestic chores and caring tasks, while the men may feel burdened by their responsibility as heads of household.

The way these methodologies work is to get household members of all generations to sit together and create a shared vision: what are they trying to achieve and where would they like to be in three or five years' time? Then they analyse where they are now and what changes they will have to make to achieve their vision.

As part of this process, household members often realize that inequalities in gender roles and relations can be part of the reason they remain trapped in poverty. The vision motivates family members to work together. And the unpacking of where they are at present becomes the means by which they understand how to move towards the future and achieve their common goals. With the support of a trained mentor, the family develops the ability to understand the causes of their current situation. Their willingness to act upon the findings plays a crucial part in unlocking a household's potential.

The household methodologies are being widely applied in countries in sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia and over 40 IFAD-supported projects have included them in their design. In addition to more resilient livelihoods, participants report a reduction in gender-based violence and excessive alcohol consumption, an increase in children's school attendance and greater happiness.

For more information, see:

https://www.ifad.org/topic/household_methodologies/overview/tags/knowledge_notes

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: PRIORITIZING RURAL WOMEN'S VOICE AND PARTICIPATION

The three dimensions of rural women's empowerment – economic, political and social – must be addressed in a complementary way. Systematic, coordinated, multi-level and multi-sectoral approaches addressing gender biases in norms, attitudes and political and institutional structures are the only way to achieve sustainable and scalable progress in empowering rural women. Empowering rural women is central to the realization of the 2030 Agenda not only because of their vulnerability but also because of the risk of being left behind. Rural women also have a positive and indispensable contribution to make to the achievement of zero hunger through greater agricultural productivity and their demonstrated role in improving the health and nutrition of family members. Addressing their empowerment is therefore a matter of urgency, a priority, and a necessity.



International Fund for
Agricultural Development

Via Paolo di Dono, 44
00142 Rome, Italy

Tel: +39 06 54591


Fax: +39 06 5043463

E-mail: ifad@ifad.org

www.ifad.org

www.ruralpovertyportal.org

 ifad-un.blogspot.com

 www.facebook.com/ifad

 instagram.com/ifadnews

 www.twitter.com/ifadnews

 www.youtube.com/user/ifadTV