

# Women and Agriculture

HOT TOPIC JULY 2010

Women and Agriculture: Unlocking the Key to Food Security



Women are the key to food security. Women produce an estimated 60% and 80% of the food in developing countries and 50% of food globally. In Africa, upwards of 2/3 of all women are employed in the agriculture sector and produce nearly 90% of food on the continent. Women farmers are also the smallest smallholders, but are responsible for growing, selling, buying and preparing food for their families. Statistically, women are more likely than men to spend income on the well-being of their families, including more nutritious food, health and school costs.

Despite women's strong role in food production, marketing and value-added processing, they are disadvantaged across the agricultural value chain. They have very limited access to land, extension services, credit and other means for increasing agricultural productivity. Globally, less than 2% of land is owned by women, women receive just an estimated 1% of all agricultural credit, and where credit is accessible, it is generally through male relationships. Extension services often overlook women. Transport, which often requires traveling long distances by foot and carrying one's goods where there is little access to motorized vehicles, is a task that falls disproportionately on women and girls. Women are also plagued by low levels of literacy, numeracy and access to education which limits their capacity to be productive household heads. In Africa where one third of all households are headed by women, this is significant. For example, in Kenya women produce 80% of the food, represent 70% of all agriculture workers, and manage more than a third of smallholder farms, women only receive less than 10% of the credit provided for smallholders, and own less than 10% of the land.

Women are also held back by "desperation-led" migration. This occurs when male heads of households migrate in search of better economic opportunities. Women become "de-facto" heads of households. This means they are in charge of the household in practice, but often go unrecognized for their efforts socially and legally. The same effects occur when women are widowed due to HIV/AIDS and other diseases. Women left on farms don't always have the time, resources or social standing to be productive farmers. In these cases, women have no legal claim to their land, have difficulties accessing credit and other inputs such as seeds and fertilizers, and are sometimes excluded or ill-equipped to grow and market cash crops. By disempowering women to participate in farming and feed their families, the cycle of poverty continues.

Unfortunately, aid to agriculture often overlooks women as well. Social status within the community, coupled with a lack of gender statistics in the agricultural sector, means that agricultural programs are rarely designed with women's needs in mind. Not only do the programs have limited the impacts on their livelihoods or overall productivity, but these indicators are hardly ever captured in monitoring and evaluation efforts which perpetuates the cycle of exclusion.

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Yet, the potential of women's farmers is being sorely missed. Studies in Kenya show that when women farmers have equal access to inputs, education and technology, as men do, their productivity increases by 20%. The World Bank also found that in Burkina Faso, by moving labor and fertilizer from men's to women's farms, women could increase their crop production by 10% to 20%; and in Tanzania, smallholder coffee and banana growers could increase their incomes by 10% when the extra burdens on their time were reduced.

Achieving food security, increasing rural incomes and reducing poverty requires women at the forefront of any strategy. Their needs must be adequately accounted for and addressed in agricultural programs. However, great efforts must also be taken to address underlying problems such as low literacy rates, poor nutrition and access to healthcare that reduce the capacity of women to be productive farmers.