



GOOD
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ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS: WHAT'S WORKING?

March 2024



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About FOLUR

This research briefing was made possible with funding from [The Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration Impact Program](#) (FOLUR) through the UNDP-led Good Growth Partnership. FOLUR is an integrated programme designed to transform food systems by mobilising sustainable production landscapes in eight major commodities (livestock, cocoa, coffee, maize, palm oil, rice, soy and wheat) and 27 countries. Led by the World Bank and supported by the Global Environment Facility, FOLUR collaborates with the Global Landscapes Forum, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Finance Corporation, United Nations Development Programme-led Good Growth Partnership, and World Resources Institute-led Food and Land Use Coalition.

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Introduction

Gender equality is not only a basic human right, but is also the key to unlocking numerous social, environmental and economic benefits. Yet gender inequalities remain deeply entrenched worldwide, putting the whole global sustainable development agenda in jeopardy¹.

The challenge of gender inequality is especially acute in agriculture and food production. Globally, 36% of all working women are employed in agrifood systems (compared to 38% of working men), and in some regions the proportion is significantly higher, reaching 66% in sub-Saharan Africa and 71% in southern Asia.² Typically, in regions with lower economic development, women constitute a higher proportion of the workforce in agriculture. However, despite significant participation, women's contributions are often not formally recognised or properly valued. For every dollar that a man employed in agriculture earns, a woman earns 82 cents, while there's a 24% difference in average productivity between farms managed by men and by women.³

A number of constraints prevent women from participating and benefiting on an equitable footing, including discriminatory social norms and legal frameworks, which in turn limit access to land, financial and other resources and agricultural inputs.⁴ Addressing these constraints and gender disparities is critical to improve the welfare of women and their households. Empowering women and closing gender gaps in agrifood systems can in turn lead to reduced hunger and food insecurity, increased incomes and economic opportunities, and more resilient communities.

Understanding what works is crucial to advancing gender equality and unlocking the multiple benefits it brings. This research briefing delves into three constraints on women's equality – structural barriers, land tenure and resource access. For each topic, we provide a concise,

evidence-based summary of the issue. Following that, we present a case study illustrating good practice in addressing the issue and the resulting impacts. We draw key insights from each case study, which are summarised in the conclusion. Although these case studies are not part of the Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration Impact Program (FOLUR), they involve FOLUR partners and countries.

The featured constraints are by no means an exhaustive list of issues faced by women and the selected case studies often work to tackle multiple issues. While our aim is to share knowledge that practitioners can use in their own work, the role of women in agrifood systems is hugely complex and varied, and general conclusions should be treated with caution.⁶ Understanding the social and cultural context is crucial to ensure interventions to transform food systems do not exacerbate existing inequalities, but genuinely empower women and advance equality.⁷

Gender Equality:

“Indicates a state in which women and men enjoy equal rights, opportunities and entitlements in civil and political life. It implies their equal participation in decision-making, their equal ability to exercise their human rights, their equal access to and control of resources, services and the benefits of development, in addition to equal opportunities in employment and in all other aspects of their livelihoods.”⁵

UN Food and Agriculture
Organization (FAO)

FOLUR and gender

FOLUR seeks to transform global food systems by promoting sustainable landscapes and value chains. Supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and led by the World Bank, FOLUR partners collaborate through a Global Platform and run projects in 27 production landscapes, focusing on the value chains of eight commodities: beef, cocoa, corn, coffee, palm oil, rice, soy and wheat.

Women make crucial contributions in all of these production landscapes and commodity value chains, yet their role is often not fully recognised or supported. Advancing gender equality and ensuring women are equally empowered to transform global food systems is a central principle for FOLUR, and is a crucial objective in meeting the programme's environmental goals.⁸

The United Nation Development Programme (UNDP), together with the World Bank, has published a [resource guide on gender equality for FOLUR](#), which offers a consolidated selection of resources on gender equality from FOLUR Global Platform Partners over the past five years. These resources can help FOLUR country teams and their implementing agencies to develop and deliver gender-responsive interventions. FOLUR's gender principles contribute to the protection and fulfilment of women's rights under the [Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#), and the Resource Guide includes practical recommended actions for supporting the rights of women in rural areas (CEDAW Article 14). The guide is complemented by a gender learning programme designed to respond to the needs and capacity gaps within the 27 Country Projects.

FOLUR has supported the development of this briefing to dig deeper into the issues affecting gender equality in the programme's areas of intervention. As the FOLUR projects progress with implementation, these case study projects – which began earlier and thus have gender-related results and lessons to share – offer ideas and opportunities for gender-responsive actions that potentially can be included in FOLUR Country Projects.



Constraints

Structural barriers

The issue

At the root of gender inequality lie multiple social and institutional factors, including discriminatory formal legal and policy frameworks and informal norms, practices and beliefs.⁹ While legislation in many countries has sought to protect women's rights and provide equal opportunities, social norms, attitudes and biases can be harder and slower to change.¹⁰ Two in every five women worldwide live in countries with high or very high levels of social discrimination, according to the OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index (see figure 1).¹¹

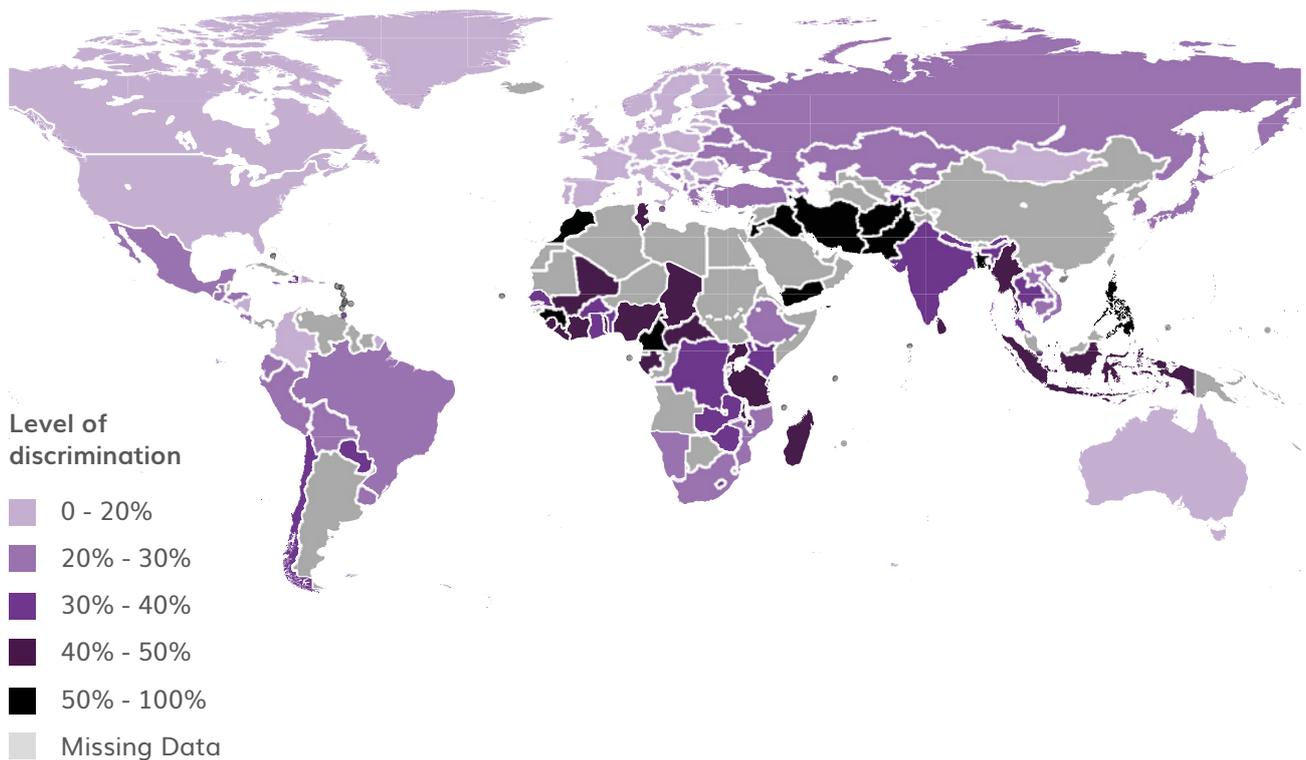
Structural barriers hamper women's involvement in agrifood systems in numerous ways. Traditional gender roles mean women farmers are also expected to take on a greater share of domestic and childcare responsibilities, while discriminatory norms around women's access to and control over income can restrict their participation in other economic activities within food systems. Women often lack access to resources and productive assets (explored in more detail below), but they may also be excluded from training and other agricultural outreach and capacity building activities and social support networks.¹²

At a deeper level, societal norms shape women's aspirations and expectations, which can be a barrier to empowerment¹³ and affect women's participation in economic, community and political activities.¹⁴ Structural barriers to gender equality in agrifood systems also intersect with, and need to be addressed in conjunction with, issues such as gender-based violence¹⁵ and child marriage.¹⁶ Gender stereotypes can be harmful to both sexes: the expectation that men must provide for their families has been linked to suicides among male farmers.¹⁷



Figure 1

Levels of discrimination against women by country.



Source: OECD. (2019). SIGI 2019 global report: Transforming challenges into opportunities.¹⁸

Notes: Final boundary between the Sudan and South Sudan has not yet been determined. Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties.

Case study:

Empowering rural women in Guatemala¹⁹

A seven-year programme in Guatemala helped transform the lives of rural women, resulting in significant increases in food production and household incomes.

The Joint Programme “Accelerating Progress Towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women” (JP RWEE), a collaboration between the FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UN Women and the World Food Programme, ran from 2014 to 2021 in the department of Alta Verapaz.

In Guatemala, 60% of women do not have an individual income, compared to 14% of men – the highest proportion in Latin America and the Caribbean. Only 37% of women participate in the formal economy, compared to 84% of men, but they carry out almost all household chores (97%). The project area had one of the highest rates of extreme poverty in the country (54%), especially among the Indigenous population.

The programme targeted 12,003 individuals, primarily women from the Q’eqchi Indigenous group, through 72 rural women’s groups and organizations. A key focus was on subsistence women farmers who were food insecure. By supporting these women to adopt improved agricultural practices, the programme enabled them to generate surplus quality food for sale, strengthening their economic autonomy and recognition of their contribution to household livelihoods. Participants also included 2,812 civil servants (2,530 of them women) from

government institutions and social organizations supporting rural women’s empowerment.

Technical training aimed at women covered issues such as better seed selection, crop diversification, production techniques and food storage. Overall production increased by 53%, with increases in staple food like maize (66.4%) and beans (39%) boosting food security and nutrition. Women’s incomes increased dramatically. At the start of the programme, 95% of women were involved in productive or agricultural activities but didn’t contribute to the household’s income: by the end, 100% were generating an income and contributing to their household’s livelihoods. Women were given support to access new markets, enabling producer organisations to generate US\$417,531 from sales of agricultural and other products over the course of the programme. Ten organisations became suppliers to the government’s school meals programme, further reinforcing their economic empowerment.

By educating women on their rights and opportunities, the programme also challenged common beliefs and significantly increased women’s participation in decision-making spheres. The proportion of women elected to local development councils jumped from 5% to 18%. All the producer organisations involved in the programme are headed by women, and 40% have established gender policies and women’s empowerment committees. In addition, the programme’s collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food led to new gender-responsive agricultural policies and the development of a tool to bring a gender perspective to rural advisory services.

One of the most striking examples of how the programme has changed social norms is in how women define themselves. In 2015, 93% of women involved in the programme described themselves as housewives. By 2021, this had fallen to 51%: the remainder said they were farmers.

Insights

Holistic approaches:

Women's empowerment is a multidimensional process, and the programme benefited from collaboration between the four implementing partners, drawing on their different areas of expertise. As well as economic and agricultural practices, the programme sought to address socio-cultural, familial, legal, political, psychological and environmental dimensions, and to increase understanding of the needs of rural women at municipal, territorial and national levels. Projects that address social, cultural and institutional constraints will have a wider and longer-lasting impact.²⁰

Long-term thinking:

Changing social norms is a long-term process that goes well beyond the timespan of most projects. Nevertheless, the programme's integrated interventions at individual, community and institutional level managed to deliver significant changes in attitudes and outcomes within a seven-year period.

Women's leadership:

Working with women in management positions can help establish support networks and develop communication and leadership skills.²¹ Female leaders are also important as positive role models for girls and women, especially in rural communities.²²

Constraints

Land tenure

The issue

Land access and use is the foundation of any agrifood system, and securing land rights for small-scale producers contributes to sustainable rural incomes, livelihoods and food security.²³ Yet women are far less likely to have the right to own land, despite making up 70% of smallholder farmers in developing world.²⁴ Globally, just 14% of agricultural landowners are women, but the proportion in Africa and East Asia is even lower with many women only having the right to land via a husband or male relative.²⁵ In Latin America, the proportion of women landowners ranges from 7.8% to 30.8%.²⁶

Where women do own land, evidence suggests their plots are smaller and of lower quality.²⁷ Disaggregated data on land ownership is limited, but in 40 out of 46 countries that have reported

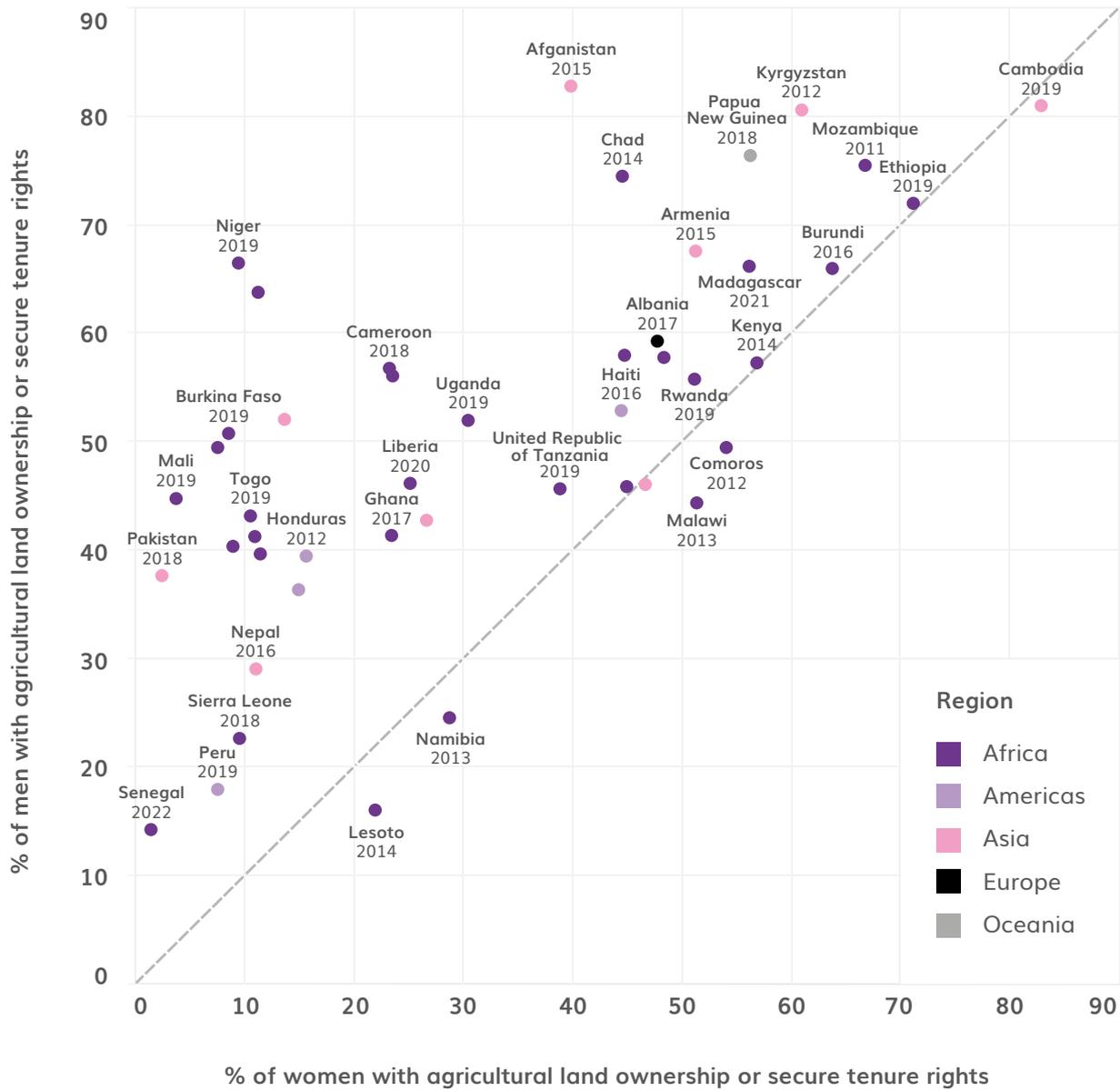
on women's land ownership, a higher proportion of men than women have secure rights over agricultural land – more than twice as many in over 40% of countries (figure 2).²⁸ Data gaps also exist around women's rights within communal land tenure systems.

Evidence from Ethiopia and Tanzania shows that secure land tenure significantly improves household productivity, especially among female-headed households.²⁹ Formalising land ownership can address customary laws and traditional practices that discriminate against women, for example around inheritance rights.³⁰ Land tenure reforms need to address not only women's individual rights to own household land, but also the rights of women within collectively held lands.³¹



Figure 2

Rates of agricultural land ownership of secure tenure by country



Source: FAO. (2023). The status of women in agrifood systems.

Notes: Share of women and men in the adult agricultural population with ownership or secure tenure rights. Dots above the diagonal line indicate that a larger percentage of men than women own land.

Case study:

Adaptive collaborative management in Indonesia

In the early 2000s, CIFOR and partners supported a community in Indonesia to claim tenure rights over an area of forest. Gender issues were a key consideration in this work which, more than 15 years after the close of the project, has had a positive social and environmental legacy.

“Customary people” make up more than a quarter of Indonesia’s population, and many depend on forest resources for their livelihoods. Under Indonesian law, customary rights over forests have long been recognised in principle, but in practice customary forests have largely come under state control. Customary people claim around 12 million hectares of forest, of which some 2,403,485 hectares are currently legally recognised.

In 2002, the Adaptive Collaborative Management (ACM) team supported the village of Baru Pelepat in Sumatra to win legal recognition for its customary forest. The team comprised CIFOR; social scientists, ecologists, and law and policy analysts from Jambi University; and local NGOs Yayasan Gita Buana and PSHK-ODA (Regional Autonomy and Law Research Centre).

The ACM team used a “participatory action research” approach to facilitate learning, adaptation and collaboration among multiple stakeholders. This process identified key concerns facing local communities, including weak representation of and lack of opportunities for women to participate in decision-making. The ACM team worked to build the capacity

of local institutions, including a local women’s group, and supported the community to lead negotiations with the district government and develop a long-term village management plan. Gender sensitivity and inclusive decision-making were built into all these efforts, and the project including efforts.

In 2006, the Baru Pelepat community’s rights were officially recognised by the district government, granting local people the right to manage 821 hectares of forest – though it was another decade before this received legal recognition from the Indonesian state. A recent evaluation shows that this work has had enduring benefits. While there has been widespread forest loss in the surrounding area, forest cover in customary forest has largely been maintained, except in a small area where an oil palm company encroached beyond the boundary of its concession; the community successfully challenged the company over this, and received compensation.

At the same time, the work helped break down institutional barriers and mindsets that prevent women from participating in decision-making and benefiting from control over customary resources. District government staff mention that Baru Pelepat women speak their minds freely during formal meetings. Decision-making in village-level institutions is participatory, transparent and democratic. This contrasts with neighbouring villages, where decision-making is still largely the domain of a male elite, with little if any engagement with other community members. In 2015, a woman was nominated as a candidate in the elections for village head – an unprecedented development.

Insights

Enduring impact:

By challenging social constructs around gender and promoting participatory approaches, the project has had a lasting impact on village governance. Capacity building at community level helped support this, which included training local leaders – including women – as part of the project's exit strategy.

Local limits:

The intense local focus meant the success was largely limited to the Baru Pelepat community – there wasn't the opportunities expand the gender work either horizontally (with neighbouring communities) or vertically (at supra-village government levels). However, the participatory action research approach could be effectively used to facilitate multistakeholder action on gender at landscape level.

Monitoring questions:

In researching the legacy of the project, the team used questions rather than quantitative indicators to monitor changes in decision-making processes. This proved a more practical and locally relevant way to carry gender-sensitive and inclusive monitoring

Constraints

Resource access

The issue

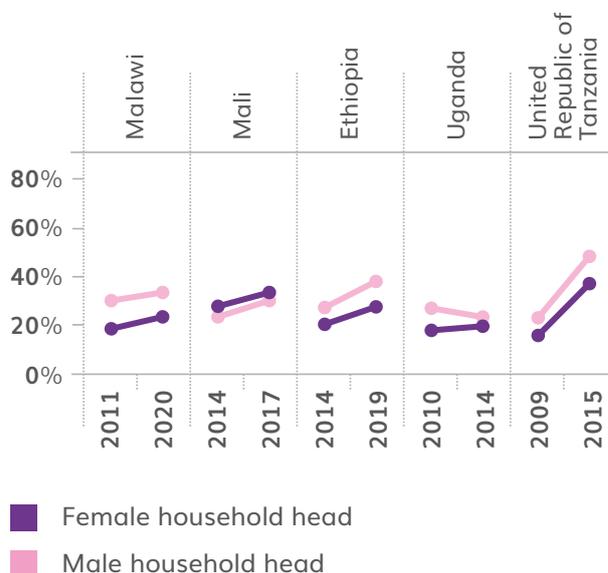
Along with access to land, women farmers are less likely to have access to financial and non-financial resources, including farming assets like machinery, livestock and agricultural inputs. This reduces their opportunities to improve productivity and yields, and to increase their income, security and resilience.³² In Burkina Faso, for example, the estimated value of men's assets was three times that of women; men are also more likely to own agricultural assets.³³ The limited use, control and ownership of assets hamper women's ability to engage in and benefit from agricultural development projects. Men are often responsible for making decisions on large purchases and capital investments: in Kenya and Tanzania, for example, fewer than 10% of irrigation pumps are bought by women.³⁴ Reduced access to productive resources is one of the major factors of inequality faced by women in Latin American countries in agricultural production chains.³⁵

Women's lack of access to resources helps explain gender gaps in agricultural productivity: controlled studies that account for gender differences in access to agricultural inputs tend to find little or no difference in yields or efficiency between female and male farmers.³⁶ Compounding this lack of assets, women are also often excluded from training and agricultural outreach efforts on better agricultural practices and technologies.³⁷ Enabling women farmers to access the same productive assets as men would bring significant advantages for food security and socioeconomic development: an FAO study from 2011 suggested this could increase total agricultural

output by up to 4% and reduce the number of undernourished people by 100-150 million.³⁸ But there have been few signs of progress, with women still lagging behind men in access to resources such as improved seeds and fertilisers (figure 3).³⁹

Figure 3

Share of households using improved seeds and fertilisers over time, by sex of household head.



Source: FAO. (2023). The status of women in agrifood systems.

Notes: Countries ordered by level of GDP per capita in the latest year in 2015 Usd. Data is restricted to agricultural households only

Case study:

Crop insurance and agricultural training in Kitui, Kenya⁴⁰

Since 2015, agricultural insurance and technology company **Pula** has supported women smallholders in Kitui county, Kenya to access crop insurance, along with training and advisory support on good agricultural practices. The ongoing project, supported by the World Food Programme, has benefited around 15,000 female farmers.

Women make up the majority of farmers in the arid and semi-arid lands that cover over 80% of Kenya. Some 16 million people, about 30% of Kenya's population, live in these areas, and most rely on a combination of pastoralism and small-scale agriculture for their livelihoods. Despite the limited rainfall, agriculture is mainly rainfed. Most women farmers rely on traditional practices and lack access to financial resources, education and technologies. This leaves them especially vulnerable to the increasingly visible impacts of a changing climate including droughts and floods, soil erosion, deforestation, diminished soil fertility and a decline in overall productivity.

Previously, crop losses could be devastating. Now, women are insured against reduced yields and are making judicious use of the compensation they receive to invest in improving their farms. As well as covering basic household necessities, women have used insurance payouts to buy seeds and other farm inputs, start new businesses, construct pens for keeping poultry, and acquire

livestock including goats and donkeys. Donkeys, in particular, help to relieve the burden on women by carrying water and equipment.

In addition, women farmers have received support in applying better agricultural practices, including improved water management and manure application, as well as low-impact grazing and growing fruit trees. Selecting the right crops for the soil and climatic conditions, supported by Pula's data-driven technology, has been an important focus. Before, indiscriminate planting led to low yields, and crops like sorghum and millet that are better suited to drought conditions were undervalued.

As a result of the project, women have reported significantly increased productivity: yields of key crops such as green grams, cow peas, sorghum and millet doubled or even tripled.⁴¹ This has boosted food security and women's incomes, which should in turn enable them to access more resources.

The Pula project has been certified by the **W+ Standard**, which provides third-party verification of measurable improvements in women's lives. Developed by WOCAN (Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management), the W+ Standard measures quantifiable improvements in six areas that are critical for women's empowerment: time savings; income and assets; health; leadership, education and knowledge; and food security. Certified W+ credits can then be sold on carbon markets or to companies wanting to contribute to the SDGs, with at least 20% of the revenue being reinvested into women's organisations.



Insights

Financial resources:

The Pula project doesn't directly provide women with resources and agricultural assets. However, by providing capacity building and financial compensation for crop losses, it has enabled women to make their own purchases, including seeds and livestock.

Access to education:

Women farmers don't just lack access to technologies and resources that can improve agricultural productivity: they may also be excluded from training and capacity building on better farming practices. This project focused specifically on training women as well as offering ongoing advisory support, both over the phone and in person. Monitoring results show that a large majority were confident in remembering and applying knowledge gained from trainings, and sharing it with family members, friends and neighbours, potentially scaling up these results.

Private sector partnership:

Partnerships can unlock innovation. In this project, the World Food Programme partnered with Pula, a Kenyan company that provides insurance and digital products designed for smallholder farmers. Selling W+ credits could provide further revenue to support the project, and could offer financial incentives to similar initiatives.

Conclusions

Empowering women and accelerating gender equality in agrifood systems and supply chains brings multiple benefits for women, for their families and communities, and for society as a whole. It boosts economies and food security, as seen in Guatemala, and can even strengthen climate resilience and adaptation, as in the Pula project in Kenya.

Just as gender equality and women's empowerment are vital tools in the transition towards sustainable food systems, efforts to transform food systems and supply chains can play an important role in empowering women and advancing gender equality.⁴² Gender-responsive interventions in agricultural and forest settings have been shown to be more effective, efficient and sustainable,⁴³ and have a significantly higher cost-benefit ratio.⁴⁴

While legal and policy reforms are essential to grant women their rights, social interventions are needed to enable women to claim these rights.⁴⁵ The most effective interventions take an integrated, multidimensional approach, targeting different levels and addressing the drivers of gender inequality as well as the immediate needs of women.⁴⁶ Understanding the specific context is vital, since gender constraints vary between, and even within, countries.⁴⁷

Unequal land tenure rights, a lack of access to finance, agricultural inputs and other resources and services, and a host of structural barriers and social norms continue to constrain women's full and fair participation in agrifood systems. These are complex, multifaceted issues that will not be changed overnight. Nevertheless, different types of interventions around the world are showing that progress is possible. FOLUR partners and others must continue to build on these efforts to advance women's empowerment and gender equality, and to realise the multiple benefits this provides.



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