



Women, agriculture and food security

KEY FACTS

- In developing countries, women tend to work far longer hours than men. In Asia and Africa, studies have shown that women work as much as 13 hours more per week.
- On average, rural women and girls spend almost an hour each day gathering fuel and carrying water needed to prepare meals. In some communities, these activities may take up to four hours a day.
- A study in Africa found that, over the course of a year, women carried more than 80 tonnes of fuel, water and farm produce for a distance of 1 km. Men carried only one-eighth as much, an average of 10 tonnes for 1 km each year.
- Studies have shown that women use almost all they earn from marketing agricultural products and hand-crafts to meet household needs. Men use at least 25 percent of their earnings for other purposes.

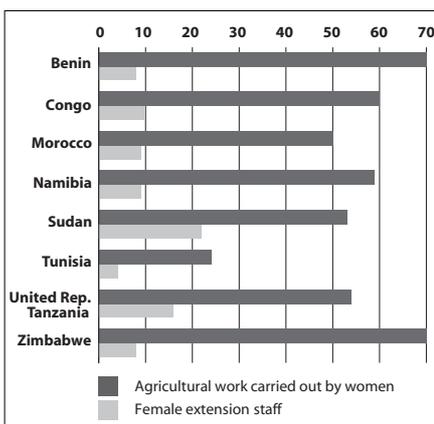
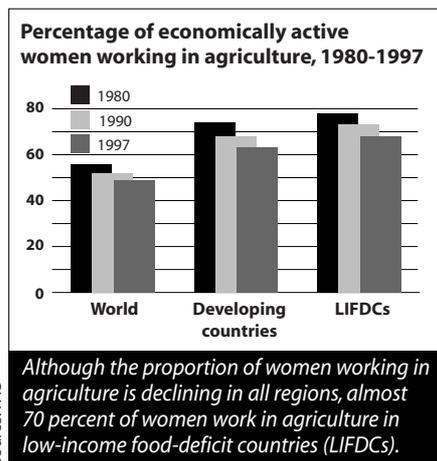
In the rural areas where most of the world's hungry people live, women produce most of the food consumed locally. Their contribution could be much greater if they had equal access to essential resources and services, such as land, credit and training. Eliminating the obstacles that hamper women could be the key to achieving the goals of the World Food Summit. But that can only be done if policies are shaped by better information about the difficulties experienced by women, and their aspirations, as well as by the participation of rural women themselves.

WOMEN HOLD KEY TO FOOD PRODUCTION

In developing countries, most women's work is devoted to agriculture. Women are involved in every stage of food production. Although men usually plough the fields and drive draught animals, women do

most of the work involved in sowing, weeding, fertilizing and harvesting the staple crops – such as rice, wheat and maize – which allows for more than 90 percent of the rural poor's diet.

Women's contribution to secondary crops, such as legumes and vegetables, is even greater. Most of these crops are grown in home gardens, tended almost exclusively by women. These gardens are often remarkably productive and critically important to nutritional and economic well-being. A study in eastern Nigeria, for example, found that home gardens occupying only 2 percent of a household's farmland accounted for half the farm's total production. Similarly, home gardens in Indonesia are estimated to provide more than 20 percent of household income and 40 percent of domestic food supplies.



Percentage of agricultural work carried out by women compared with the percentage of female extension staff in selected African countries.

OBSTACLES BLIGHT WOMEN'S HARVESTS AND HOPES

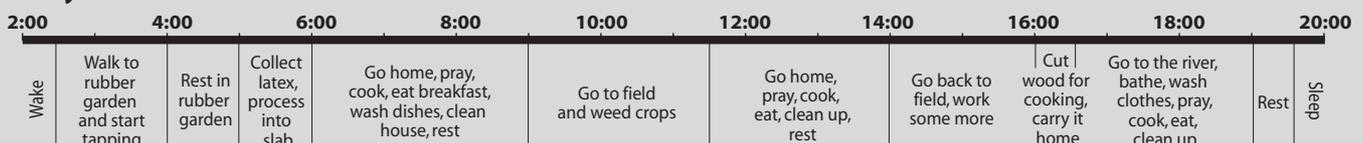
Women's contributions to food production and food security would be far greater if they enjoyed equal access to essential resources and services. In many societies, tradition and laws bar women from owning land. In South and Southeast Asia more than 60 percent of the female labour force is engaged in food production but, in India, Nepal and Thailand for example, less than 10 percent of women farmers own land.

Without land to serve as collateral, women are also cut off from access to credit. And without credit, they often cannot buy essential inputs – such as seeds, tools and fertilizer

– or invest in irrigation and land improvements. In Jamaica, for example, women typically receive only 5 percent of loans granted by the Agricultural Credit Bank.

Because their role in food production is rarely recognized, women rarely benefit from extension and training services that would teach them about new crop varieties and technologies. A recent FAO survey found that female farmers receive only 5 percent of all agricultural extension services worldwide. In Egypt, where women make up more than half the agricultural labour force, only 1 percent of extension officers are women.

A day in the life of an Indonesian woman farmer



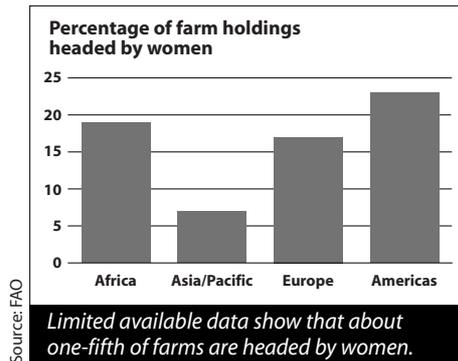
LACK OF GENDER-SPECIFIC INFORMATION SKEWS POLICIES

Information is critical in developing effective policies to help women. But out of a sample of 93 national agricultural censuses conducted worldwide from 1989 to 1999, only 53 contained information on female-headed holdings.

The census data that are available suggest that in most regions of the world one out of five farms is headed by a woman. Even this figure probably underestimates significantly the proportion of female owners and agricultural managers. Often the legally recognized male "head of household" is assumed to be the "head of holding" as well, even when women are responsible for the day-to-day work and decisions of running the farm.

In areas where men migrate to cities to look for work, the proportion of female-headed farms and households is growing rapidly. This is contributing to what has been described as both "the feminization of agriculture" and "the feminization of poverty".

In Malawi, for example, the male population in rural areas dropped by 21.8 percent between 1970 and 1990. Over the same



period, the rural female population declined only 5.4 percent.

Not all female-headed households are poor. But the proportion of households headed by women is far higher among the poor. A recent study in a village in Indonesia classified households into four socio-economic groups. Not one of the most prosperous households was headed by a woman, but almost one-quarter of the poorest households were.

To obtain more and better statistics on women's roles and needs, steps must be taken to reanalyse existing data and to clarify key concepts such as "agricultural holding" to remove the gender bias.

TAPPING WOMEN'S KNOWLEDGE TO REAP GAINS

Developing improved agricultural policies requires detailed information not only about what rural men and women do on a national scale, but about variations from village to village and about how rural people perceive the problems they face and strategies for eliminating them.

Information of this sort can only be obtained by involving rural women and men themselves in analysis and planning, using techniques such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA).

PRA draws on the knowledge and experience of women and men at the village level, using tools such as seasonal calendars, daily activity profiles and household and village resource maps.

Experience shows that PRA can shed light not only on where the problems lie but also on how to solve them:

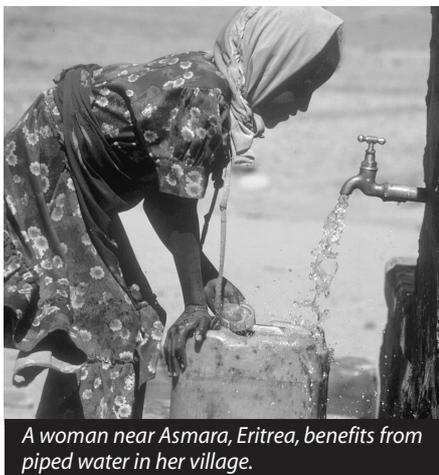
- After learning that women worked two to three times as many hours as men, an extension training project in Ethiopia decided to hold training sessions in the villages to accommodate women's busy schedules. Priority ranking helped extension agents identify topics that women would be eager to learn about.
- In India, PRA revealed that increasing poultry production, which is controlled by women, improved both household nutrition levels and cash savings. Increasing goat herds, on the other hand, set back efforts to expand women's education, because girls were pulled out of school to tend the larger herds. Based on this information, project planners shifted their emphasis to poultry production.

which women frequently devote up to four hours every day.

Removing the obstacles faced by women yields a double harvest – improving their lives and allowing them to put their labour, knowledge and creativity to work more productively.

CASE STUDY INCLUDING WOMEN IN AN AGENDA FOR ERITREA

Too little water. Too little food. Too much work. In arid Eritrea, the numbers and analyses gathered through participatory rural appraisal (PRA) paint a stark picture of the burdens women bear and the obstacles they face.



A woman near Asmara, Eritrea, benefits from piped water in her village.

Women reported that they commonly work up to 15 hours a day during the cropping season. Whatever the season, women work far longer hours than men – up to 30 additional hours per week.

Women ranked shortages of water and food at the top of the list of problems they face, followed closely by lack of access to health care and their crushing and tedious workload.

But the PRA did not only highlight problems. It also yielded a blueprint for action, a list of effective, socially acceptable ways to reduce women's burdens and improve the food security of their families and communities simultaneously.

Constructing wells and boreholes, for example, would help alleviate chronic water shortages. Wells plus grinding mills would significantly reduce the heavy work of fetching water and grinding grain, to

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