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Synopsis

GENDER IN AGRICULTURE

Closing the Knowledge Gap

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IFPRI issue brief | 84
October 2014

Women play important and varied roles in agriculture, but they have unequal access, relative to men, to productive resources and opportunities. Closing these gender gaps would be good both for women and for agriculture. This was the message given by *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010–11*, a report of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). As it prepared the report, the FAO drew together a wealth of background information based on a growing body of research and statistics on women in agriculture, and it commissioned the International Food Policy Research Institute to edit a book based on these background studies. The resulting book, *Gender in Agriculture: Closing the Knowledge Gap*, is a compendium of what we now know about gender gaps in agriculture and why such gaps matter.

WHY CLOSE GENDER GAPS IN AGRICULTURE?

There are two motivations for closing the gaps in resources and opportunities that exist between the sexes: equality and efficiency. Gender equality is a basic human right with value in and of itself. The importance of gender equality has been highlighted in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which are commonly accepted as a framework for measuring development progress. In addition, closing the gap will lead to greater economic efficiency by giving women the tools to be more productive. These two motivations are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing. For example, a woman who is empowered to make decisions regarding what to plant and what inputs to apply on her plot will be more productive.

ANALYZING GENDER IN AGRICULTURE

The book presents a suite of quantitative and qualitative methods for collecting and analyzing data on gender relations in agriculture, and it identifies data needs for gender analysis in agriculture to ensure that the voices of women farmers are heard. It also explores the basis for the oft-quoted statistic that women produce 60–80 percent of food in the developing world. Using three approaches to

shed light on this issue, the book concludes that it is not possible to substantiate this claim—or even the statement that women provide 60–80 percent of the labor in agriculture. This conclusion should not be interpreted, however, to mean that women play an insignificant role in the agricultural sector. Women contribute a large portion of the measured contributions to agricultural labor, and women's share of the measured agricultural labor force has a positive impact on national-level agricultural productivity. The "60–80 percent" statistic obscures the underlying reality that it is difficult to separate women's labor in agriculture from other uses of their time, as well as from men's labor, and also obscures that women's role in agriculture cannot be understood properly without considering the gender gap in access to land, capital, assets, human capital, and other productive resources.

GENDER, ASSETS, AND INPUTS

The gender gaps in access to different types of assets—such as land or livestock— affect women's and men's productivity in agriculture. Control over and ownership of assets is a critical component of well-being. Like income, assets can be converted to cash, but they are also multidimensional. Who controls these assets within the household is critical to household and individual well-being, and how these assets are allocated within households has important implications for a range of outcomes.

Land is the starting point for the discussion on the role of assets because it plays a fundamental role in both agricultural production and security. Various policy mechanisms can be used to improve gender equality in land access. These mechanisms include joint-titling modalities, land leasing, land use certificate issuances, community and territorial land delimitation programs, land allocation through state-managed land reform programs, land law reforms, and other types of land interventions. The book also highlights the social and cultural factors that are important to consider when choosing among policy options to overcome women's disadvantaged position in accessing land. These factors might include unequal access to existing social protection mechanisms, differences in bargaining power, and other forms of social control and gendered social stereotypes.

Many empirical studies of agricultural productivity differences find that men and women are equally efficient farmers once gender differences in the use of agricultural inputs are accounted for. A review of the evidence shows that men consistently use more inputs than women. Much of this research is from Africa south of the Sahara because production data are seldom disaggregated by gender in other regions.

Financial constraints are often cited as one reason women use lower levels of inputs. Appropriate financial products that enable women to save, borrow, and insure are important for strengthening their roles as producers and for widening the economic opportunities available to them.

In societies where legal systems and cultural norms make it difficult for women to accumulate valuable assets such as land, livestock has often emerged as an alternative form of wealth for women. Women's rights over their livestock, however, are often rather insecure, perhaps because they often acquire livestock through relatively informal means, such as inheritance or gifts. Interventions that secure women's rights to livestock could be of great benefit to women.

It is only recently that the development community has recognized the importance of social capital—defined in terms of group membership and social networks—as an asset in agriculture. Indigenous institutions and networks in almost every rural society provide access to mutual support, labor, seeds, and information. In many societies, men are more likely to join production-oriented groups like farm cooperatives, whereas women are more involved in civic or religious groups. Therefore, to reach women with agricultural information and resources, it may be better to work with groups in which women already participate instead of focusing only on production-oriented groups. As with any other asset, building social capital requires investment of time and resources.

For most rural poor people, their most important asset is their own physical capacity for work, which depends heavily on their nutritional and health status. The book examines the evidence on gender differences in vulnerabilities to poor nutrition and health and their potential effects on the agricultural productivity of men and women. It focuses on four nutritional and health disorders—undernutrition, iron-deficiency anemia, HIV, and malaria—and shows that the impact on productivity is different for women than for men. Owing to biological and social vulnerabilities, women are generally disadvantaged across all four disorders. Although investment in nutrition and health may increase women's agricultural productivity, the social barriers to that investment, such as women's time constraints and traditional roles, must be recognized and addressed.

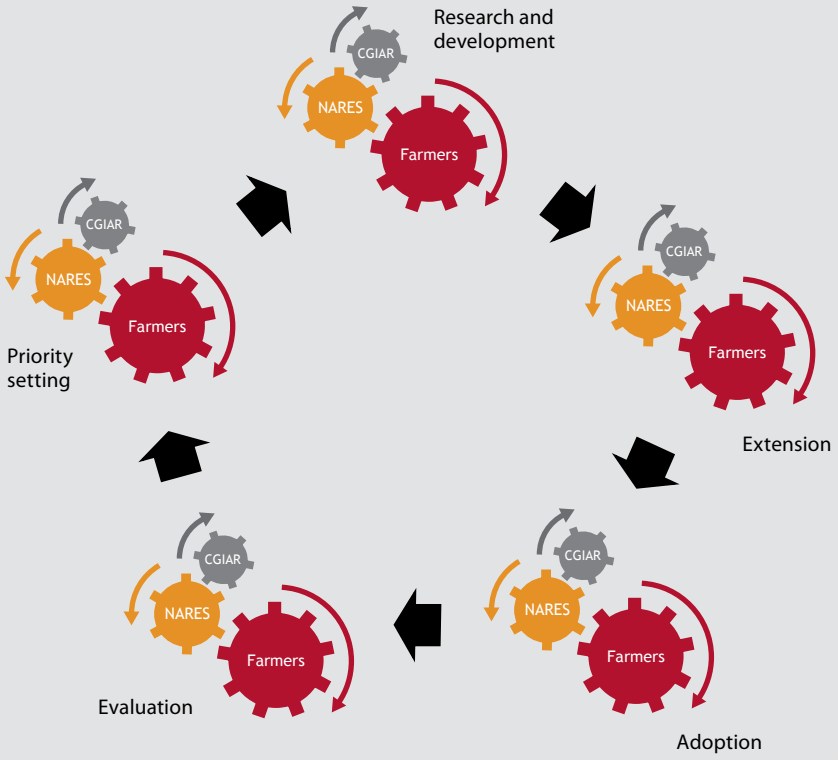
GENDER AND MARKETS

A gender gap also exists in access to markets. Many women participate in labor markets as wage workers on farms or as processors and traders along the agricultural value chain, but much of their work is informal or unpaid and goes unrecorded. There is currently enthusiasm in agricultural development policy for enhancing value chains as a means of raising farmers' incomes, but most approaches to value-chain development do not address how to organize markets in gender-equitable ways. Improving women's participation in agricultural value chains can help ensure the flow of quality goods, improve the efficiency of business, develop the market opportunities that women represent as buyers and suppliers, target niche markets such as fair trade, ensure the dignity of work and economic equity for all, and lead to broad-based economic growth. How best to address gender disparities in value chain development, however, is still the subject of debate.

The book provides a more detailed analysis of the barriers women farmers face in accessing high-value markets for cocoa and coffee in Ghana and Uganda. Female farmers in both countries are as productive as male farmers and receive comparable market prices to those received by men when they farm with equal resources and sell their crops in the same way. In practice, however, they rarely have similar access to assets and markets as men.

Gender differences in agriculture also apply to participation in labor markets. The book examines the barriers to female employment in the rural labor market and the underlying reasons for these barriers. It also discusses examples of gender-aware or gender-transformative policies, laws, and other instruments designed to help women circumvent or tackle these barriers themselves. Examples include mixed or women-only institutions such as self-help groups, cooperatives, and workers' organizations.

FIGURE 1 Conceptual Components of a Gender-responsive Agricultural Research System.



Source: Meinzen-Dick et al. (2011)

Note: NARES = national agricultural research and extension systems.

GENDER, INSTITUTIONS, AND POLICY

The agricultural research, development, and extension system at the global, regional, and national levels is intended to increase agricultural productivity, profitability, and sustainability. But to what extent does this system recognize the different needs of women and men in agriculture? The authors suggest that what is needed is a paradigm shift away from an exclusive focus on production and toward a broader view of agriculture and food systems—one in which women's distinct role in ensuring the food security of their households is better recognized and in which women have a greater voice in setting priorities for research (**Figure 1** identifies the main elements of a gender-sensitive agricultural research system). This involves recognizing women's roles throughout the value chain for both food and nonfood crops and for both marketed and nonmarketed commodities.

Including women in the agricultural research system plays an important role in ensuring that women's needs are addressed. Yet in developing countries, fewer than one out of four researchers is a woman, although large differences exist across countries. Lack of information has often constrained women's adoption of improved technologies and agricultural practices, and there is a strong case for improving the gender-responsiveness of agricultural extension systems.

THE WAY FORWARD

Women make vital contributions to agriculture and rural enterprises, despite the many gender-specific constraints they face in accessing resources and opportunities. Lifting these constraints would have enormous potential benefits for the agricultural sector and for society at large. Despite the wealth of recent evidence on gender and agriculture, the information base on which gender-sensitive policy decisions can be made needs to be continuously built.

Recommendations for future work include the following:

- Improve the collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data.
- Continue to undertake and validate empirical work on gender issues in agriculture.
- Explicitly explore alternative design and delivery mechanisms to meet context-specific gender needs.
- Explicitly evaluate the gendered impacts of agricultural interventions.

Addressing the constraints women face requires going beyond simplistic statements. We must instead draw on better data and evidence to understand and engage with the complexities and variability of gendered roles and resources in agriculture.

Reference

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 ISBN: 978-0-89629-862-0