

Women in Agriculture

By Lynn Brown and Catherine Ragasa

Women are estimated to make up most of the world's agricultural workforce, but this is often overlooked in policy design, which can result in misguided policies and programs, foregone agricultural output and income, and potentially exacerbated levels of poverty, malnutrition and hunger. This is troubling in an international context where food prices have increased by over 60 percent since January 2008, increasing the number of poor by an estimated 73 million to 105 million people.

The forthcoming (October 8, 2008) World Bank-FAO-IFAD publication, *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*, highlights the pervasive gender inequalities in access to productive resources and political voice in the agriculture sector and presents evidence of benefits from gender-responsive actions. The *Sourcebook* provides a practical guidance for practitioners in integrating gender into operations and calls for greater investment in gender equality as an essential component of agricultural productivity and as a long-term solution to the food price crisis.

The most urgent step is to strengthen property rights, asset ownership and access to credit services, technology and marketing channels for women working in agriculture. There has been some progress over the last decade; for instance, many African countries have passed laws to strengthen women's land rights. Ethiopia, for one, issued certificates to about six million households for 18 million plots between 2003 and 2005, which documented inheritable land use rights for men and women. The women who received certificates almost universally reported this had improved their economic and social status and, after the titling, both men and women invested more in their land. In Kenya, studies estimate that redistributing inputs equally between women and men farmers could result in up to 20 percent increased agricultural yields, and double the national GDP from 4.3 to 8.3 percent.¹

Women tend to focus on crops for household consumption and to sell any excess while men cultivate crops primarily for sale, leading to a disproportionate portion of agricultural income going to men. This may result in a suboptimal situation for the household: studies show that when women control the income, households spend a significant degree more of their income on food consumption and on children's health and schooling, which benefits the household greatly in the long run.

The establishment of women's groups and networks has proved to be one way to bolster their agricultural income. Mainstreaming gender into policies and institutions is also vital. Numerous examples demonstrate the importance of setting quotas that increase the representation of women in user groups. For example, the Karnataka Watershed Development Project in India, meant to improve the productive potential of watersheds, involved the women from the community from the onset by offering them



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The important role of women in agriculture in many parts of the world calls for urgent attention to gender specific policies.

training programs and explicitly including them in farmer groups. The project did not only improve agricultural yields with crop diversity increasing from 4 to 9 varieties, but 70 percent of the women in the community said the project had improved their lives. Average household income also went up by US\$373 in the community.

In many parts of the world, Ministries of Agriculture and their researchers and policy-makers are dominated by men; for example, women make up just 18 percent of African agricultural scientists. In such a scenario, there is a risk that the important perspective of the rural female agricultural worker and the constraints and opportunities that she faces everyday are simply lost. Ensuring a pipeline of qualified female candidates for senior positions in public and private agriculture organizations could be a way to ensure that women agricultural workers receive the policy and project support they need to raise households' food security, incomes and welfare.

Against the backdrop of a food crisis that is now estimated to quickly increase the ranks of the undernourished from today's 800 million people, the gender inequities that continue to constrain agriculture from achieving its potential output and its possibility to spread food security and reduce poverty levels should be addressed. ☺

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¹ World Bank. 2007a. *Gender and Economic Growth in Kenya*. Washington, DC: World Bank.