

The impact of gender inequalities on food security: what policies are needed?

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Introduction

Gender equality in access to productive resources and services in rural areas is essential for countries to eradicate hunger and poverty. Women's access to all of the resources and services that are necessary to be productive in agriculture is significantly lower than that of men in all regions of the world, particularly in the poorest ones. Numerous studies have demonstrated that closing this gender gap can generate significant societal gains in the reduction of food insecurity as well as in long-term development through multiplier effects in education, health and nutrition. Gender-sensitive agriculture (including fisheries and forestry) and rural development (ARD) policies are needed to close this gap. However, most existing policies do not address the specific needs of women and men in spite of the high participation of women in the agricultural work force. This article analyses the gendered constraints in agriculture and proposes a classification of the gender sensitivity of policies, with the aim of aiding policy makers in understanding what makes a policy more or less gender sensitive and ultimately, to have better agriculture, food security and development outcomes for developing countries.

Why gender in Agriculture?

The importance of productivity in the agricultural sector

Currently, 821 million people are undernourished in the world (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2018). The global population is projected to increase from 7.3 billion today to almost 9.8 billion by 2050, creating the need for a 50% increase in food production and other agricultural products to

satisfy the growing demand for food (FAO, 2017). More urban and wealthier populations will create a shift in the composition of food demand (towards higher demand for fats and animal protein diets) and the increase in overall consumption levels, requiring significant increases in livestock production and its intensive use of resources (FAO, 2017). Climate change, degradation and the scarcity of natural resources as well as urbanisation, will further challenge the world's ability to increase and diversify agricultural production.

Ensuring food and nutrition security in the long-term will require not only an increase in productivity and in production around the world, especially in developing countries, but also the conservation of natural resources and the prioritisation of sustainability (for example, the adoption of sustainable land management practices) in agricultural productivity growth.

Women are key actors in these processes, but they face systematic and generalized gender-specific constraints in access to productive resources, be they physical (land, inputs) or not (knowledge, financial services, technological innovations). Agriculture is essential for women, as the sector provides the majority of employment opportunities in most regions of the world. Likewise, women are essential for agriculture, as they provide the sector a high proportion of its labour. More productive agriculture will provide better livelihoods and free time for women, thus allowing more empowerment.

Rural women's productivity: observation and issues

Women represent, on average, 43% of the agriculture labour force in developing countries (FAO, 2011), but there is a huge gender gap between women and men in the access to the resources needed to be productive. Consequently, this limits women's productivity in agriculture. Studies show that plots managed by women are 20-30% less productive than plots managed by men, and that

bringing yields on the land farmed by women up to men's levels would increase agricultural output by 2.5-4% in developing countries (FAO, 2011).

Closing the gender gap would generate significant gains for all of society by increasing agricultural productivity and outputs: it has been demonstrated that it could lead to the number of hungry people decreasing significantly, by approximately 12-17% (FAO, 2011). Increased incomes from closing the gender gap would also have positive effects on the status and power of women in households and on their economic and political position within society, allowing them to better contribute to economic growth in general. The higher productivity of women in the agricultural sector has a number of multiplier effects with long-term social benefits.

Obstacles faced by rural women and the need for gender-specific policies in agriculture

The gender gap in agriculture results from deeply ingrained social norms perpetuated by a gendered system of social relations, and by cultural and religious values and practices, which differ by country and region. Policymakers must identify difficulties women face through gender-based data and analysis, especially in the agricultural sector, which is particularly affected by customary laws. Unfortunately, most policies remain gender blind or are not implemented by rural communities where customary practices and traditional laws prevail over statutory laws and rights. Specific agricultural sector policies that aim at reducing the gender gap are urgently needed and where they do exist, governments and policy-makers must fight against opposition and enforce them.

Access to land and natural resources

Land is the most basic requirement for farming and is often considered a symbol of power. Robust evidence from all regions in the world shows that men are more likely to hold land titles, and to have

larger holdings, as well as holdings of better soil quality. In Bangladesh, Ecuador and Pakistan, for example, average land holdings of male-headed households are more than twice the size of those of female-headed households (FAO, 2011). Closing the gender gap in the access to land is a main domain where gender sensitive policies are needed.

Policies that ensure women and men have equal access to land need to be reinforced and completed by measures to protect women's rights to land tenure and property. In countries where discrimination under the law still exists, a key strategy is the revision and the reform of all national legislation on land and natural resources.

Access to financial services

Financial services are essential to improve agricultural output, food security and economic opportunities both in the household and in society. However, this is an area where women are systematically excluded, with the exception of microcredit programmes. Literature shows that women's incomes are more likely to be used for the welfare of the household and that their repayment rates are higher than those of men (World Bank, FAO and IFAD, 2009). Legal barriers and cultural norms still bar women in many countries from holding bank accounts or signing financial contracts in their own right.

Financial institutions, NGOs and particularly governments should promote financial literacy for women and simplify procedures. It is also important to create and promote a women-friendly financial system, which should be based on the excellent results of microcredit programmes on women's empowerment.

Access to decent work

Women's employment income can make a critical difference in the poverty status of their households,

but female employment rates are lower than male rates in developing countries: about 70% of men and 40% of women are employed, with large variations across regions (FAO, 2011). When rural women are in wage employment, they are more likely to be in part-time, seasonal or low-paying jobs and even in equivalent jobs and comparable levels of education and experience, they are usually paid less than men. The reproductive roles of women add a huge burden and frequently create obstacles to productive roles in agriculture.

Policies to support the creation of decent employment in rural areas for both men and women will go a long way to reducing hunger and poverty. In order for them to be effective, these policies need to address the reproductive burdens of women, including childcare facilities, as well as infrastructure improvements (FAO, IFAD and ILO, 2010).

Access to education, extension and technologies

New technologies, education, knowledge and extension are crucial to improve agricultural productivity. In some regions (especially Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa) girls and women are less likely to have access to education and more likely to be illiterate. This limits their access to information concerning good practices, extension and improved technologies. In social contexts where meetings between women and men from outside the family nucleus are restricted, the lack of female extension agents for rural women prevents them from participating in productivity growth in agriculture.

Education and training are essential for the empowerment of women, improving their possibilities to access decent employment, participate in decision-making and obtain information about their rights. Education should be linked to more technical instructions in agricultural science and technology, especially in areas where women represent a large part of the agricultural sector. The share of female professional staff in agricultural higher education (lecturers, professors, scientists, etc.) remains very low in most countries. Low female representation in agricultural research may have a bearing on rural women, as the choice of research agendas may not reflect their needs.

More often, rural women face significant barriers in accessing new technologies that are crucial in

improving agricultural productivity, aggravated by their limited education and financial and time constraints. As an example, in some Kenyan districts, women owned only 18% of the farm tools and equipment owned by male farmers (FAO, 2011).

Government policy interventions need to focus on school enrolment for girls in regions where the access of girls to education is lower than that of boys, target women's specific needs, including through gender-sensitive extension methods, include gender training for teachers, and involve women more in agricultural research and higher education.

Access to decision making

Partly because of their lack of access to education and resources, and to a greater extent because of the social norms of rural societies, rural women have difficulties accessing decision-making roles both at local and national levels. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 2017 data, the number of women in parliament remains low: 23.4% in the single or lower house and 22.9% in the upper house or Senate. In governments, only 7.2% of heads of State and 5.7% of heads of government are women.

Women's improved access to decision-making roles at local levels could ensure better access to the essential land and resources needed to increase their productivity and incomes and achieve decent work opportunities.

Women's groups and cooperatives are of the utmost importance for their voice to be heard in policy making processes, as well as to obtain benefits in production and productivity such as economies of scale, access to markets and productive resources, and higher control over their income among many other benefits. An example of the power of these organizations in empowering women and improving their livelihoods is the Self-Employed Women's Association – SEWA – in India. Efficient measures are needed to remedy the lack of women among decision-making bodies. Quota systems in local governments have had good results in some areas, but they need to be carefully designed and monitored.

What policies exist: scope and impact

Agriculture sector policies tend to be non-gender sensitive for the most part. They rarely take into account the specific needs of women and men. When they do, they frequently reflect common

gender biases, stereotyped women's roles and the value attributed to them. A major factor in making agricultural policy gender sensitive is the recognition of the burden of domestic work and other reproductive activities as taking substantial amounts of women's time and energy. The degree to which reproductive chores are explicitly addressed will thus be a determining factor of the extent of the policy's gender sensitivity. Another main feature characterising agricultural sector policy from a gender perspective is the underlying assumptions of women's roles and contributions to society and to the economy.

Table 1 proposes a typology of agricultural policies in terms of their sensitivity to gender issues and provides illustrative examples. I propose a characterisation of agriculture sector policy varying from what I have called Gender-Purposive (policies whose main objective is to reduce gender inequalities in the context of a larger overall agricultural goal) to Gender-Blind and Gender-Neutral policies. Between these extremes, there is a range of policies varying in their gender sensitivity. I have labelled these Gender Sensitive – Transformative (those that result in women's empowerment or in more equal gender relations – even if this was not their primary objective), Gender Sensitive – Residual (gender issues are not explicit among policies' objectives and women are identified as a vulnerable group among others) and Gender Sensitive – Instrumental (those policies that use women's traditional roles within societies and households: mothers, care givers for development gains such as improving children's nutrition, etc.)

Examples of different kinds of Gender Sensitive policies:

Gender Sensitive - Transformational

A relevant example is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), enacted in India in 2005: it guarantees 100 days of paid work to all rural households whose adult members are willing to perform unskilled manual labour; requires that at least one third of the workers should be women and that men and women are paid an equal wage; and addresses constraints faced by women to participating in the labour market by providing childcare facilities and local work.

However, this initiative has not succeeded in all regions equally: in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, for example, women were reported to have had major

difficulties in registering as workers under the NREGA (Khera and Nayak, 2009), and according to 2007 data, employment opportunities for women in those states were less than 25% of the total workday generated (PACS, 2007). Some Panchayats in those states refuse to provide work opportunities for women, and preference is given to men (PACS, 2007). In addition, there is a lack of childcare facilities everywhere in the country (FAO, IFAD and ILO, 2010).

Although well-formulated, this programme's transformative impact on gender relations and on the empowerment of women can only be ascertained in due time, and by including a set of appropriate indicators.

Gender Sensitive - Residual

Malawi developed a programme to improve the access of small holders to agricultural inputs at subsidized prices called the Farm Input Subsidy Programme (2005-6 to 2008-9). It was administered through a series of vouchers that enabled rural households to buy fertilizer, seeds and pesticides at significantly reduced prices. Beneficiaries were identified using four criteria: (1) that the household owned land would be cultivated during the relevant season; (2) that the household was a bona fide resident of the village; (3) that only one beneficiary would be eligible in a household; and (4) that vulnerable groups, especially households headed by children and women would be given priority (Chibwana et al., 2010).

The CFMS (Chibwana, Fisher, Masters and Shively) study of 2010 found that households headed by young women were less likely to receive a complete input subsidy packet than those headed by older males. Although the programme identified women as beneficiaries, it did so only in as much as they are members of "vulnerable groups". It made no provision to address the reproductive burdens of women, nor did it use gender sensitive indicators to monitor its roll out. It resulted in benefitting more the more educated and male-headed households.

Gender Sensitive - Instrumental

Food and nutrition security policies frequently see women primarily as mothers, focusing only on infants and young children or pregnant women's nutrition. Women who are not mothers or mothers to be, such as teenage girls or women in post-reproductive age, have specific nutritional needs which are generally not taken into account

(Nestel, 2000). One example is the government of Sri Lanka's policy response to malnutrition through 18 Maternal and Child Health and Nutrition programmes, consisting of three broad strategies: direct food assistance programmes, poverty reduction programmes and the Ministry of Health's provision of an integrated package of maternal and child health and nutrition services. The programme targets lactating mothers, pregnant women and young children by providing services in maternal care during pregnancy and lactation and nutrition education (by supporting breastfeeding practices, etc.), but does not target women who are not mothers or mothers to be. The food supplements distributed to them were frequently shared with the rest of the family.

Gender Blind

In Uganda, the promotion of non-traditional agricultural exports (NTAE) aimed to contribute to poverty eradication and food security by providing income to rural households (Dijkstra, 2001). The government was proactive in promoting NTAE by taking macroeconomic and specific sector measures through various policies, especially concerning investments in the NTAE sectors. In their original formulation, policies promoting NTAE did not have specific measures to empower women in agriculture whereas more than 5 million women are economically active in agriculture, almost half of the work force in the sector (Kasente et al., 2000). After reactions to pressure by women's movements, the Ugandan government took some measures to address some of these concerns related to NTAE in the agricultural policy some years ago. However, the "overburden" of women persists, whereby women's labour is more constrained than that of men, because, in addition to their active role in the economy, women bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid "care" work in the household, including child and elder care, and provisioning of food, fuel, and water.

Gender Neutral

These are policies do not have any different effect on women and on men and so do not require the use of gender disaggregated data or gender indicators. This category can only apply to those initiatives where no human beings are involved, given that all human action is gendered. It is included here only for reference and completeness of the typology. Activities such as setting up a

laboratory for the analysis of the HPAI virus should be gender neutral, but this is hardly a policy.

Conclusions

There is still a long way to go to close the gender gap in agriculture. Governments should develop Gender Purposive policies and invest in Gender Transformative policies to obtain long-term societal benefits as well major gains in agricultural productivity and in food security. In the agricultural sector, policies tend to be gender blind or gender sensitive in mild ways, i.e. not addressing some of the main constraints faced by women, which constitute true bottlenecks for sustainable rural development. Moving towards Gender Transformative policies will require major efforts in demonstrating the impact of closing the gender gap on specific areas of the agricultural sector. It will also require investment in developing relevant capacities, as well as a redoubling of efforts in producing relevant data for evidence-based agricultural policy and for strengthening national capacities to collect, analyse and use these data in policy making.

Table 1: Policy gender typology

TYPE OF POLICY	OBJECTIVES	CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN	ADDRESS REPRODUCTIVE BURDEN	USE OF EVIDENCE	MONITORING AND EVALUATION	EXAMPLE
GENDER PURPOSIVE	Closing the gender gap in access to productive resources in agriculture. (address women's strategic needs)	Women and men are equal social and economic agents, making unique contributions to development. Women are entrepreneurs, workers, etc.	Yes, essential for women to participate on equal terms with men	Gender disaggregated data to understand specific needs and constraints of each gender	Specific indicators on the gap between men's and women's access to resources. Impact on agricultural productivity and production (Impact on power relations in the household)	?
GENDER SENSITIVE-TRANSFORMATIVE	Improving livelihoods in rural areas; Improving agricultural productivity; Food security or other agricultural or rural development objectives	Women are social and economic agents, workers, decision makers and make economic contributions	Yes, clearly stated	Gender disaggregated data to understand specific needs and constraints of each gender	Gender sensitive indicators on a variety of aspects	NREGA, India
GENDER SENSITIVE-RESIDUAL	Agricultural sector objectives, gender not explicit	Women are one vulnerable "group", usually among others	No	Usually not gender-disaggregated	Gender disaggregated data on participation in programmes	Subsidized agricultural inputs, MALAWI
GENDER SENSITIVE-INSTRUMENTAL	Agricultural sector objectives, gender not explicit	Women are mothers, care givers, responsible for children's nutrition and wellbeing Women perform reproductive roles "naturally"	No, usually assume women's opportunity cost zero	Usually not gender-disaggregated		Food security policy SRI LANKA
GENDER BLIND	Agricultural or rural development objectives that do not take into account women's and men's specificities	Women are invisible as producers, consumers and decision makers	No	Not gender disaggregated	No gender sensitive indicators	NTAE and macroeconomic policies in Uganda
GENDER NEUTRAL	Outcomes in which men's are women's specific needs and contributions are not relevant		No	Not gender disaggregated	Gender sensitive indicators not relevant	Installation of laboratory for analysis of HPAL virus (with no capacity building or any other activity where people are involved)

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