

Decreasing Gender Inequality in Agriculture: Key to Eradicating Hunger

MARCELA VILLARREAL

Director of Partnerships

United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization

AS THE 2015 DEADLINE FOR the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) approaches, evidence shows that significant progress has been made in some areas of the world toward the attainment of some MDGs.¹ However, progress has been slower in rural areas and in countries where the proportion of rural population is high. Inequalities hinder the achievement of development goals, and gender inequalities, which cut across all areas of development, are particularly pronounced in rural areas. Women in rural areas continue to lag behind both rural men, and urban men and women.

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According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), an estimated 842 million people are currently undernourished around the world.² The projected increase in population by 34 percent within the next 40 years will only lead to additional demand for food, feed, and fiber. Food production will have to increase by 60 percent (close to 77 percent in the developing world) to feed the additional 2.3 billion people living in 2050.³ By that year, the overall population is expected to be more urban and wealthier, resulting in shifts in the composition of food demand towards a higher proportion of livestock, sugar, and vegetable oils, and an increase in consumption levels. In order to reach an average of 3070 kcal per person per day, an additional 940 million tons of cereals and 200 million tons of meat must be produced per year by 2050.⁴

Gender inequality cannot be ignored if the challenge of growing food demand is to be addressed effectively. Women constitute about 43 percent of the agricultural labor force in developing countries, ranging from 20 percent in

MARCELA VILLARREAL is director for partnerships and former director of the Gender and Rural Employment Division at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. She has been a major contributor to the evidence-based approach to gender and development issues.

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Latin America to 50 percent in East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ They play a critical role in agriculture and rural enterprises in developing countries as farmers, workers, and entrepreneurs. However, they face systematic and generalized gender-specific constraints in the access to the productive resources necessary for agriculture, both physical (such as land and inputs) and not (such as knowledge, financial services, technological innovations). Recent studies have shown that if women were given as much access to productive resources in agriculture as men, 100 to 150 million people could be lifted out of hunger.⁶ This would have important spillover effects throughout the development spectrum.

Achieving higher levels of gender equality in other crucial development indicators such as education and health is also fundamental to address hunger related problems.⁷ A study by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) shows a strong relationship between educational attainment, which is a Gender Gap sub-index, and the Global Hunger Index. The result suggests that higher levels of hunger in countries are associated with low levels of literacy and access to education for women.⁸ Throughout the developing world, an increase in women's education accounted for 43 percent of the total reduction in child malnutrition.⁹ According to the IFPRI study, equalizing the statuses of women and men in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa would reduce the number of malnourished children by 13.4 million and 1.7 million, respectively.¹⁰

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Gender inequality as well as hunger-related problems tend to be more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas. For example, rural Indian women work almost 11 hours more than urban women and 12 hours more than urban men while receiving substantially lower pay.¹¹ In Vietnam, the relative pay gap between men and women is much higher in rural areas than in urban areas.¹² In all regions of the world, rural children are more likely to be underweight than their urban counterparts.¹³ In South and Central America for instance, rural children are nearly 1.8 times more likely to be underweight than their urban counterparts. In other regions of the world, this gap is not much better.¹⁴ The world's least urbanized region, sub-Saharan Africa, is also the region where gender inequality is most widespread.¹⁵

In most countries, large increases in GDP growth rate have not resulted in an improvement of the gender development index or the population's overall quality of life.¹⁶ This is because the existing policies do not address women's and men's specific needs, constraints, and obstacles. In 2003, the African Union (AU) formulated the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme

(CAADP), an important thematic area of the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) designed to foster agricultural development. While this program has played a pivotal role in boosting Africa's GDP growth, which is one of the main mandates of the NEPAD, it has not addressed the problems of gender inequality.

Gender-sensitive agricultural and rural development policies must be adopted in order to effectively address development issues like chronic hunger. These policies should have specific gender inequality reduction goals aimed at closing the gender gap that skews access to productive resources and services between women and men in rural areas and, consequently, greatly hampers agricultural production. This is all the more important in Africa, where the problem of hunger is particularly acute, with one out of every four people currently undernourished, compared to a world average of one out of eight. This article will focus on sub-Saharan Africa, drawing on examples of inherent gender inequalities in agricultural practices in that region.

ACCESS TO LAND

Land is an essential resource for farming and is often associated with social status and power. Strong evidence shows that men are more likely to have larger plots of land, hold more land titles, and have holdings of better soil quality than women. In sub-Saharan Africa, the share of landholdings owned by women ranges from a low of less than 5 percent in Mali to a high of 30 percent in countries such as Botswana, Cape Verde, and Malawi.¹⁷ The low share of female landholders indicates that women mostly depend on men to access land resources.

In most parts of rural Africa, customary land tenure systems are embedded in traditional social institutions, such as family and marriage arrangements. These institutions remain the principal means of determining rights to inherit, own, and use land even in countries where statutory laws have been changed in order to ensure equality between men and women. Traditional institutions governing family lineage, marriage, and inheritance are often strictly followed as a means of preserving social order. In regions where customary systems predominate, gender is a main determinant of a person's degree of access to and control of resources.¹⁸

The *levirate* customary system in Africa, under which a widowed woman is required to marry one of the male relatives of the deceased husband, is prevalent in large parts of the eastern and southern regions of Africa, where the AIDS epidemic has hit the hardest. With substantial numbers of adult males dying

from AIDS, their widows are frequently accused of causing their death and are subsequently evicted from the clan, losing their rights to use the land that were acquired through marriage. Thereafter, they typically do not seek any legal action because they are afraid to be stigmatized or cannot afford it. That leaves them with few economic options to secure their livelihoods and those of their children. They resort to transactional sex for money, housing, or food, which puts them at a higher risk of contracting HIV.¹⁹ This is a case in point where the traditional system does not allow women to inherit or own land and regulates use rights through marriage. The shock to the system caused by an external factor such as the AIDS epidemic discloses the underlying vulnerability caused by gender inequality in acquiring and maintaining rights to land.²⁰

ACCESS TO FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Financial services play a critical role in increasing agricultural output. Credit is essential to buy core agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and seeds. Many programs such as rural finance and microcredit are designed to target women; however, their access to these facilities varies by country. Madagascar typifies the situation, with the share of households that use microcredit nine percentage points lower for those headed by women than those headed by men. Ghana is a rare exception to this since there is no apparent gender gap in the use of microcredits.²¹ Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, women tend to receive smaller loans than men for similar activities and are forced to use men's names to take out loans.²² As a result, women are greatly limited in their ability to independently secure land and inputs for agricultural activities to boost overall production.

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ACCESS TO DECENT WORK

Women's labor income can greatly contribute to the improvement of their household's well-being. However, in the developing world, only 40 percent of women engage in paid work compared to 70 percent of men.²³ Additionally, women tend to work for longer hours than men. In Benin and Tanzania, rural women work 17.4 and 14 hours more than men every week, respectively, including household chores and paid work.²⁴ One study estimates that women spend 40 billion hours per year fetching water in sub-Saharan Africa alone.²⁵

Rural women are more likely to be employed in part-time or low-paying jobs even with similar levels of education and experience as men.²⁶ In Malawi, 60 percent of rural working women are employed in low-wage jobs versus 40 percent

of rural working men. Ninety percent of economically active rural women work part time compared to 66 percent of economically active rural men.²⁷ In rural areas of Ghana, only 15 percent of working men and four percent of working women receive a wage.²⁸

Furthermore, women's reproductive roles, which carry responsibilities such as child rearing and household activities like preparing food and taking care of the sick, create obstacles for their productive roles, in particular for agricultural production, the industry in which rural women are predominantly employed. The time expended by women in these activities is positively correlated with the poverty level of households since these reproductive roles are very time-consuming due to the lack of adequate household technologies.²⁹ Some technological solutions are available; for example, in areas where electricity is not readily available, solar cookers could provide energy without women having to spend many hours fetching firewood. However, in spite of its simplicity and relative inexpensiveness, this solution is not widely applied.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has also hindered women's ability to pursue agricultural activities since they carry most of the burden of taking care of the sick. In Ethiopia, for example, women in non-AIDS-affected households spend 33.6 hours per week working in agriculture while women in AIDS-affected households only spend 11.6 to 16.4 hours working in agriculture.³⁰

ACCESS TO INPUTS, EDUCATION AND EXTENSION SERVICES, AND TECHNOLOGIES

Inputs, technologies, education, and knowledge (including agricultural research and training) are critical to improving agricultural productivity, but men and women do not have equal access to them. In Ghana, only 39 percent of female farmers used improved crop varieties as opposed to 59 percent of male farmers because they have less access to extension services, education, and land.³¹ In many countries, women are half as likely to use fertilizers as men. The use of purchased inputs depends on the availability of complementary assets such as land, credit, education, and labor—all of which are more constrained for female-headed households than for those headed by men.³² The same can be observed regarding access to farm tools. In some Kenyan districts, the share of farm tools females owned was only 18 percent of the share of farm tools owned by males.³³

The lack of education is a major constraint to alleviating chronic hunger because it hinders the adoption of agricultural technology. Whereas girls' school enrollment and educational attainment is equal or higher than boys' in many developing regions of the world, in sub-Saharan Africa girls and women have

fewer opportunities to attend school and are more likely to be illiterate. Of the 100 countries around the world where girls are less likely than boys to complete primary education, half are in the sub-Saharan African region. In the Central African Republic, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), between 57 and 69 girls study until the last grade of secondary school for every 100 boys.³⁴ As a result, they face more challenges in learning how to use improved technologies and inputs for agricultural production. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Chad ranks fifth-worst on the Global Hunger Index and second in terms of gender inequality with a very low female literacy rate of 13 percent. The figure for men stands at 41 percent.³⁵

Social norms in many countries also deter women from participating in activities that improve agricultural productivity. In Tanzania, only one-third of extension officers were women by 1997.³⁶ Women struggle to access extension services, as male extension agents tend to visit women farmers much less than male farmers and in some cultures, women are even barred from talking to men. Even when female farmers have access to their services, contacts with extension agents often contribute to output on male-managed plots, not necessarily on female-managed plots.³⁷

ACCESS TO DECISION MAKING

Women tend to have lower levels of participation in decision-making roles in their families and at the local and national levels. Social norms in rural societies as well as the lack of access to education and resources are the main reasons for this. About 34 percent of married women in Malawi and 28 percent of women in the DRC are not involved in decisions about the spending of their earnings.³⁸ According to the 2013 data by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the percentage of women in parliaments in sub-Saharan Africa remains very low—21.3 percent in the lower houses and 18.8 percent in the upper houses.³⁹ Social constructs limit women's ability to make and implement decisions that could improve their economic conditions and have positive ripple effects throughout society. Rwanda, on the other hand, is a notable exception—more than 50 percent of its Parliament is made up of women. As a result, the Rwandan Parliament is much more effective at passing laws that address gender inequality.⁴⁰

GENDER-SENSITIVE POLICIES

Gender inequalities in access to land, agricultural resources, financial resources,

inputs, education, extension services, decent employment, and decision-making opportunities represent major setbacks for the development agenda conveyed by the MDGs. They slow progress on the eradication of chronic hunger, the achievement of universal primary education, the reduction of child mortality, the improvement of maternal health, and the fight against HIV/AIDS, among others.


In order to meet development goals, and in particular to reduce chronic hunger levels, agricultural policies should address the specific needs of men and women in all agriculture-related activities. In addition, specific policies are needed to effectively reduce the gender gap in access to productive resources. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, special efforts should be made to sensitize the institutions behind the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP)—such as the African Union, the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and ministries of the agricultural sector—to the importance of reducing gender inequalities for better agricultural policy outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Policies to secure women's access to land are a priority. The sustainable implementation of these requires a change in cultural norms and practices. Educating families, communities, and institutions about the economic and social benefits of securing women's land rights is an important step. Financial institutions, governments, and civil society organizations should ensure equal opportunities for women to access credit by promoting financial literacy programs and developing products that are well-suited for women's agricultural activities, entrepreneurial development, and family obligations such as child care. Policies to provide decent work opportunities for both men and women in the rural areas are urgently needed in order to reduce poverty. Those policies should also address women's reproductive burdens with child care facilities and reliable infrastructure for water and electricity.⁴¹ Time constraints for rural women need to be taken into consideration through innovative solutions to increase their productivity. Water sources in villages, for instance, can significantly reduce the time women spend fetching water. Water projects that meet various livelihood objectives and adequately take into account

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gender issues are likely to be sustainable.⁴² In order to reduce the education and knowledge gap, governments need to consider putting greater emphasis on investing more on women's education, hiring more women extension officers, increasing women's involvement in agricultural research, and developing more female-friendly technologies. Laws and institutions need to be reformed so that women are in a better position to make decisions at the family, local, and national levels. Consequently, they will be able to provide alternative ideas to balance policies implemented by male-dominated institutions, which would in turn facilitate access to land and resources, improve productivity and incomes, and reduce poverty in society as a whole.

If rural women's specific needs are well addressed, their contributions to society will have a significant impact. According to the "World Development Report 2012: Gender Equity and Development," women generally reinvest a much higher percentage of their earnings in families and communities than men.⁴³ This is equally true in all parts of the world as it is in sub-Saharan Africa. Effective agricultural policies that are gender-sensitive will not only reduce the gender gap between men and women, but also tremendously boost agricultural production, which will in turn significantly reduce chronic hunger and contribute to the attainment of all the development goals. Gender equality is smart economics. 

NOTES

1. United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2013*.
2. Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World* (Rome: 2013).
3. Ibid.
4. Due to changes in consumption patterns which include increased demand for meat, the FAO projects that the global average consumption in kcal per person per day will rise to an estimated 3070 by 2050.
5. Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food and Agriculture*.
6. Ibid.
7. In fact, gender equality is related to higher levels of broad human development. Data from the 2013 Human Development Report show that there is a high correlation between human development and gender equality, with low human development index values associated with high gender inequality index values. The human development index includes three major dimensions: long and healthy life (life expectancy index), education (education index), and gross national income per capita (income index). Countries that belong to the low human development category have an average human development index of 0.466 while the gender inequality index stands at 0.578. On the other hand, countries that belong to the very high human development category have a human development index value of 0.905, while the gender inequality index value amounts to 0.193.
8. International Food Policy Research Institute, *2009 Global Hunger Index Calls Attention to Gender Inequality, Need to Empower and Educate Women and Girls* (Washington, D.C.: 2009).
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Food and Agriculture Organization, *Gender Equality* (Rome: 2010).

12. Amelita King and Maurizio Bigotta DeJardin, *Paid Work and Gender: Rural-Urban and Regional Dimensions* (paper presented at meeting of FAO-ILO-IFAD in Geneva, March 31–April 2, 2009).
13. Food and Agriculture Organization, et al., 2011.
14. United Nations, *Rural Women and the Millennium Development Goals* (New York: 2012).
15. Whereas on average 50 percent of the world's population lives in rural areas, in Sub-Saharan Africa about 70 percent of people live in rural areas. See: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Urbanization Prospects, the 2011 Revision* (New York: 2011). Data show that 87.2 percent of the rural population in sub-Saharan Africa lives on less than \$2 USD per day as of 2008 and three-fourths of the poor live in rural areas. See: International Fund for Agricultural Development, *Rural Poverty Report 2011* (Rome: 2011).
16. Sheila Bunwaree, *Growth, Gender and Equity NEPAD and the Renaissance: Myth or Reality?* (African Development Bank, 2007).
17. Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food and Agriculture*.
18. Food and Agriculture Organization, *Gender and Land Compendium of Country Studies* (Rome: 2005).
19. Marcela Villarreal, "Changing customary land rights and gender relations in the context of HIV/AIDS in Africa" (paper presented at the Institute of Research for Development International Symposium, Montpellier, France, 2006).
20. Ibid. A study by the FAO found that female-headed households in which there was a person living with AIDS or in which orphans were being fostered owned an average of 1.55 hectares, while AIDS-affected male-headed households owned about 3.0 hectares. In contrast, households that were not directly affected by the epidemic had an average of 4.77 hectares.
21. Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food and Agriculture*.
22. World Bank, FAO, and IFAD, *Gender in Agriculture Source book* (Washington, D.C.: 2009).
23. Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food and Agriculture*.
24. Food and Agriculture Organization, International Fund for Agricultural Development, and International Labor Office, *Gender Dimensions of agricultural and rural employment: Differentiated Pathways out of Poverty* (Rome: 2010).
25. Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food and Agriculture*.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Food and Agriculture Organization, *Gender Equality*.
29. World Bank, *Gender, Time Use, and Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, D.C.: 2006).
30. Ibid.
31. Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food and Agriculture* (Rome: 2011).
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *Global Education Digest 2011: Regional Profile: Sub-Saharan Africa* (Montreal: 2011).
35. International Food Policy Research Institute, *2009 Global Hunger Index Calls Attention to Gender Inequality, Need to Empower and Educate Women and Girls* (Washington, D.C.: 2009).
36. Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food and Agriculture* (Rome: 2011).
37. Ibid.
38. World Bank, *Gender Equality and Development* (Washington, D.C.: 2012).
39. Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in National Parliaments* (Geneva: 2013).
40. UNDP, *Rwanda: Women Helping lead country's transformation* (New York: 2012).
41. Marcela Villarreal, "The impact of gender inequalities on food security: what policies are needed?" (paper presented during the Colloque International, Genre Familial & Agriculture Paysanne, regards Nord-Sud at the University of Toulouse II-Le Mirail, May 22–24, 2012).
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