

# Women – the untapped potential for food security

Despite the crucial role of women in family farms and small-scale agriculture, gender inequality is still present in many ways – jeopardising the food and nutrition security of millions of people.

Family farming by definition is a means of organising agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production. It is managed and operated by a family and is predominantly reliant on non-wage family labour, provided by women, men and children working together on the family's farm. In this concept, the family and the farm are closely linked, co-evolve and combine economic, environmental, reproductive, social and cultural functions. In most of Africa and South Asia, small farms run by the family still account for the largest share of agricultural output.

The role of women in these smallholder agricultural systems is particularly remarkable as they provide the bulk of the agricultural labour force. They mainly produce food for household consumption and local markets, whereas men work more often in wage labour or cash crop production. Despite this vital role of women in small-scale agriculture, gender inequality is still present in many ways. Women, for example, have less access to productive resources, services and assets, and their vital contribution to the family farm is often still ignored. Consequently, closing the gender gap and recognising women's rights and role in family farming is one of the core objectives of the

International Year of Family Farming (see also articles on pages 6–10).

For this reason, the following article provides an overview of the various tasks, challenges and responsibilities of women in family farms across the global South. In addition, negative consequences of gender-biased politics and its effects on food and nutrition security are illustrated. Conclusively, gender-sensitive methods and approaches are presented that have been field-tested in various rural development programmes implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

## ■ Nothing works without women: a wide range of essential responsibilities

The gender-based division of labour in developing countries assigns women

a diversity of tasks in smallholder agriculture, livestock husbandry and households, making them responsible both for meeting basic needs and the survival of the family. In addition, it is the women who cook the food and spend a total of roughly 40 billion hours a year fetching water.

Women assume important activities in family food production, ranging from seed management through the cultivation of agricultural produce to storage, processing and marketing of certain products. In the smallholder or subsistence economy, their role is of particular significance since men are more involved in marketing-oriented production. In animal husbandry, women are mainly responsible for poultry and small livestock, feeding and milking, cleaning out the coops, barns and sties as well as composting the manure. It is up to them

*Men and women planting vegetables together in Senegal. In sub-Saharan Africa only 15 per cent of land-owners are women.*

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### Some facts on rural women

- Presently, around 842 million people are suffering from hunger world-wide, especially in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Sixty per cent of them are women and girls.
- Women make a significant contribution to family farming.
- Women account for an average 40 per cent of the agricultural labour force. The share reaches from 20 per cent in Latin America to 50 per cent in East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and in some West African countries, it is up to 80 per cent.
- Only around five per cent of all agricultural extension services reach and benefit women farmers. Topics of special concern to women are frequently only insufficiently addressed by male advisors, while just a few advisors are women.
- Women benefit from a mere 10 per cent of financial support for agriculture and forestry or fisheries.

to maintain the animals' health and to process animal products such as eggs, milk and wool. In addition, women tend the household and kitchen gardens, which often secure the families' food supplies in times of poor harvests. In this way, women ensure their family's healthy and diversified nutrition but also contribute importantly to the absorption of shocks by increasing the household's resilience. They are also heavily involved in the fisheries sector. In Asia and West Africa up to 80 per cent of fish catches and shellfish is marketed by women. This shows that women play a key role in family farms across the world. Moreover, they are the key actors regarding survival strategies and minimising risk to households. The relevance and diversity of their activities make women important knowledge-bearers with respect to the sustainable use of natural resources, climate adaptation strategies and agrobiodiversity. In spite of this, the work performed by women is generally unpaid, and often they can only earn an income by selling surplus agricultural produce.

### ■ Making use of the potential

In many regions, wars and conflicts, disease, HIV/Aids and the growing migration of male family members to urban areas or abroad are resulting in a trend towards a feminisation of agriculture, with women bearing the sole responsibility for production as well as

the household. While the absence of men makes the efforts of women more apparent, an ever increasing number of women have to take on additional tasks.

Despite this key role in family farming, women are denied or enjoy only restricted access to and control of productive resources such as land, livestock and water. Women lack access to information, knowledge, and inputs (fertiliser, seeds or financial services) and face mobility constraints in many regions. In developing countries, 80 per cent of staple food is produced by women, but they only own an average of ten per cent of cultivated land. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, 85 per cent of land-owners are men due to legal and cultural hurdles posed by inheritance. In Mali, women own a mere five per cent of cropland. Often, land is only registered in the name of a man, even if his wife has bought or inherited the land or added it to the household when marrying. Moreover, various studies show that the disadvantaging of women in times of crisis or in the wake of natural disasters is on the increase. Women are bearing the brunt of shocks and crises and are the first ones to make do without food for the benefit of their families.

As a result of this inequality and gender gap, women smallholders produce 20 to 30 per cent less per area unit than male producers. Thus the potential that the family farm bears is not made use

of optimally. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that women could raise yield by this percentage, if they had equal access to productive resources, inputs, information and services. Overall agricultural production in developing countries would grow by up to four per cent, and the number of people suffering hunger would drop by 100 to 150 million people. In addition, experience has shown that if women generate their own income and enjoy land ownership as well as control of financial resources, this will have a direct positive effect on their children's nutrition, health and education. Thus one of the most important factors in food security is closing the gender gap by greater participation and support of women as producers, ensuring their ownership and access to inputs, services and information as well as the elimination of structurally and culturally conditioned gender discrimination.

### ■ More effective approaches in securing better opportunities

GIZ is conducting a wide range of measures to promote women as well as gender mainstreaming in order to eliminate gender-conditioned development obstacles in rural areas. The following examples clarify this.

**Capacity Development** as a key to equitable rural development helps women to decisively raise their access to and control of natural resources and other inputs. Specific training as well as integrating women in rural organisations have proven to be particularly effective. GIZ is supporting this approach in the Fizi Region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In addition to improved agricultural production practices, the women are trained in the organising and management of civil society and producer groups in order to enhance their role and their self-confidence in the family and in local decision-making structures. The male

village population and local authorities are sensitised to improve the division of labour in the family and thus give women better protection and the opportunity to earn their own income. Local services have been reactivated and advise the whole farming family, men and women, on modern cultivation. By selling excess field produce at local markets, women and families receive an additional income. Village committees, supported or newly founded by the project, arbitrate in cases of conflict, usually over land rights. Together with traditional authorities and in cooperation with judges and lawyers, traditional law is being revised and aligned with national law, supporting women's access to land.

GIZ uses **policy advice** to create a political and institutional environment that is favourable to women in the formal and informal agricultural sector. Experience has shown that an adequate political and legal framework is indispensable in ensuring women equitable access to resources and means of production and control of them. In Nepal, the rate of official and registered land transfer to women has increased three-fold thanks to a special incentive system in land taxation involving a ten per cent tax exemption for any land registered in a woman's name.

Ensuring and institutionalising a **balanced and equal participation** of women and men in all administrative and decision-making committees is a further

*A family processing cereals in Peru. In Latin America, women account for on average 20 per cent of the agricultural labour force.*

success factor. Having an equal say in decision-making processes enables better access for women to resources and production factors such as land, water, capital and markets. This becomes apparent, for example, in inland fisheries in Burkina Faso, where targeted involvement of women actors through participatory management approaches along the fish value chain has significantly increased family income and food security of households.

Creating **transparency and gender-sensitive awareness** of existing gender imbalances among the population in rural areas is a further necessary step. This is accomplished with the aid of key actors such as village chiefs, elders and spiritual leaders, which is also how awareness was raised among men of the important contribution made by women in the milk industry in a joint GIZ and Oxfam project in Nicaragua. In a series of meetings organised by gender specialists, the participants of the project discussed the different roles of women and men. The sessions addressed quality requirements and related task distribution, included services provided to women and men by the co-operative and provided training on communication skills between husband and wife to promote joint decision-making as a business unit. By



Photo: C. Haeuser/GIZ

changing their bylaws, the two participating and already existing co-operatives made it easier for women to join them, which caused the share of female members to rise from eight to 43 per cent. In addition, the women started to formulate their needs and demands more clearly and specifically request services. As a result of their key role, donors began reorienting their strategies and assigning more financial resources to women.

## ■ Conclusions

Sustainable rural development that contributes to food and nutrition security as well as poverty reduction still requires full acknowledgement of the roles and responsibilities of women in rural areas and the provision of adequate support. On family farms, women make an essential contribution to food production and thus significantly increase food and nutrition security in rural areas. However, much potential is still unused. Rural development approaches and measures therefore have to clearly reflect this reality and focus their activities more on supporting women and closing the existing gender gap. This is a precondition for reducing hunger, strengthening rural livelihoods, and sustainably improving living conditions in rural areas. The IYFF is the right time to shed light on women's role in family farming, raise awareness and start with action.

### No one-size-fits-all solutions

In most countries, discrimination of women is still present and therefore reducing the inequalities between the genders, and strengthening the role of women remains a great challenge. However, context-specific analyses and approaches are required according to the particular socio-cultural, economic and ecological conditions. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions. The work of GIZ has shown that even in areas such as Afghanistan, where women's discrimination is still high and gender relations as well as the promotion of women remain a big challenge, much can be achieved in rural development, namely at village and family farm level, if sensitive methods and context-specific, adapted approaches are applied. Furthermore, gender-sensitive action needs to be based on a broader process of creating awareness that supports the change of mind set of rural families, communities and decision-makers.