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Photo: Farha Khan/IFPRI

RURAL WOMEN AND FOOD SECURITY – OF MYTHS AND FACTS

When it comes to describing the link between rural women, food security and the conservation of natural resources, certain claims are bound to turn up again and again in specialist essays. Not only do they promote stereotypes of women as either victims or saviours, their impact on policy design for food security and gender equality can be disastrous as well. Our authors take a closer look at four myths about rural women and show how we could do better.

By Agnes Quisumbing, Cheryl Doss, Ruth Meinzen-Dick and Sophie Theis

It is not unusual to read an article or blog on gender and agriculture claiming that women make up 70 per cent of the world's poor, produce 60 to 80 per cent of the world's food, own two per cent of the land, and can save the planet! Unfortunately, none of these myths can be supported by evidence. Indeed, if women were able to produce all that food by themselves, with very few resources, and be stewards of the environment, they would be Wonder Women indeed!

Myths persist because they contain a kernel of truth. It is true that, globally, women control fewer resources than those needed to fulfil their responsibilities to ensure food and nutrition security for themselves and their families. However, none of these claims are based on sound empirical evidence and all risk leading to misguided policy and action. We unpack these myths in a recent article in *Global Food Security* (Doss et al., 2018) and draw on it heavily for this article.

MYTH 1: 70 PER CENT OF THE WORLD'S POOR ARE WOMEN

Let's start with the myth that women account for 70 per cent of the world's poor. Despite the well-documented disadvantages that women and girls face in terms of schooling, land, assets, and voice in their households and society, no data exist to support this claim. Poverty measures are calculated from income and expenditure data, which are usually collected at the household, not the individual, level. To make an assertion about women's poverty levels, one typically classifies households according to the sex of the household head or makes assumptions about the distribution of resources within the household – both of which are unsatisfactory.

The myth itself has demographically implausible implications. It suggests that men and children make up only 30 per cent of the world's poor, which vastly underestimates the number

of children in poverty. It also disregards the fact that there are more women (in absolute terms) living in male-headed households than in female-headed households because the former are more common and typically larger.

Why does debunking this myth matter for food security? Aside from casting women as victims, rather than as contributors to food security, the focus both on women as disproportionately poor and on female-headed households as more vulnerable to poverty can distort the design and implementation of programmes and policies. This view assumes that all women are alike, but there are wealthy women as well as poor women, and characteristics other than gender, such as caste and ethnicity, may be more important for programme design and targeting. The focus on female headship also masks important differences among female-headed households – female heads of households who receive remittances from a migrant husband, maintain social connections



The myth that women own only one to two per cent of the land masks the diversity of tenure situations.

Photo: Neil Palmer/IWMI

to the husband's family, and expect to have their husband return are very different from a widowed or divorced female household head. By ignoring girl children and adolescents, the myth ignores the different experiences through the lifecycle.

MYTH 2: WOMEN PRODUCE 60 TO 80 PER CENT OF THE FOOD

The second myth – that women produce 60 to 80 per cent of the world's food – is equally popular, especially when referring to African agriculture. It is true that women are important for food security, especially within their households. Women's kitchen gardens or homestead plots play an important role in providing diverse diets, and in some contexts, women also grow a large share of the staple cereal or root crops that are consumed by the household. They also contribute labour to family farms or work for wages on others' farms.

But there are no data to support a claim about the amount of food that women produce. First, it is difficult, if not impossible, to attribute a share of the food that is produced to women. With very few exceptions, most smallholder production relies on the labour of both men and women, so that allocating the output between them is problematic. Second, measuring agricultural labour is challenging. Even if it could be measured accurately, ag-

gregating across tasks would still be difficult. Does an hour spent weeding count the same as an hour preparing the fields? And men and women tend to do different tasks. In addition, much of women's work in producing food, such as tending kitchen gardens or small livestock or poultry, is often not included as agricultural work.

Better data on women's and men's labour in agriculture and household production are critical for designing policies to promote food security. When new opportunities arise, through changes in markets or technologies, the social norms and traditional patterns of labour will shape who is able to take advantage of them. Women's responsibility for domestic chores and food production may limit their ability to take advantage of these opportunities. To increase food security, we shouldn't focus on measuring how much food women produce; we need to recognise that agriculture is important for rural women, strengthen their access to the resources needed for productive agriculture, and reduce the time and energy burdens of agricultural and household work, including food processing and preparation.

MYTH 3: WOMEN OWN ONE TO TWO PER CENT OF THE LAND

A third myth is that women own one per cent or two per cent of the world's land. This myth

is often linked to issues of food security; the concern is that women are extensively involved in food production but rarely own the land that they farm. It is true that both the legal systems and patriarchal gender norms may prohibit or make it difficult for women to acquire and retain land. Moreover, women are disadvantaged in most inheritance systems.

Again, this myth isn't supported by evidence. First, it implies that men own the other 98 to 99 per cent of land, when much land is under some form of customary tenure or is owned by the state, without formal documentation (titles). Second, of that land that is owned, it does not consider land that is jointly owned by a man and a woman, which is a sizeable proportion in many countries. Finally, analyses of nationally representative data from Africa (Doss et al., 2015) all find that of the land owned by individuals, women's share ranges from four per cent in Nigeria to 40 per cent in Malawi. While this illustrates the wide variety in land ownership regimes across Africa, it is definitely more than two per cent.

To ensure food security, it is critical for farmers, both men and women, to have secure tenure to the land that they farm. While both men and women face risks of losing land, women are exposed to an additional level of vulnerability since they may lose access to their land in the case of divorce or the husband's death. Thus, attention should be paid to strengthening land

tenure, with particular attention to women's land rights. Both land law and family law – including inheritance and marital property law – must protect and enforce women's rights to own and inherit land. Women's rights have to be protected when land rights are formalised through titling or certification, through simple steps like having women's names on land documents. Women must also be aware of their rights, be able to enforce them, and challenge social norms limiting their land rights. Legal literacy programmes and mobilising community workers as paralegals can contribute to actualising women's land rights.

The myth that women own only one to two per cent of the land misrepresents the situation on the ground and masks the diversity of tenure situations. The proposed solutions tend to simply promote titling in women's names, when what is needed is more complex. Better data availability on land ownership and land rights, disaggregated by sex, will provide the means to monitor changes over time.

MYTH 4: WOMEN ARE BETTER STEWARDS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The final myth is that women are better stewards of the environment. The basis for this myth is that because of women's traditional roles of gathering firewood, collecting water and managing agriculture, natural resource depletion particularly affects them and they therefore have incentives to conserve resources. The myth also suggests that women will provide healthy, sustainably grown food to feed their families and communities. Women often do have specialised knowledge of certain resources, like medical plants or landraces of crops, and if women are responsible for selecting and storing seeds, they may protect biodiversity. This myth has been useful in drawing attention to women's knowledge, which is too often overlooked by projects that tend to meet primarily with men.

The first problem with this myth is that the evidence is quite mixed: in some contexts, women are better managers of environmental resources, and in others, they are not. Much depends on women's incentive to invest in natural resource management. A second problem is that it treats all women alike, simplifies the relationship between women and nature, and neglects men's role in natural resource conservation. Studies using data from many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America have shown that men play a larger role than is often assumed, such as in collecting firewood, and



Projects to change gender roles are more successful when men are explicitly integrated.

Photo: Desirey Minkoh/FAO

these patterns vary considerably across sites. Women's actions may be motivated more by their limitations in other resources, a desire to reduce their own work burdens, or a way to guarantee old age support in communities where women do not control resources – than by an intrinsic connection to nature.

Finally, this myth can lead to ineffective policies and programmes. Targeting women in environmental or climate-smart agriculture projects can increase their workload and ignores the potential and actual complementarities between men and women in terms of their knowledge and skills. Instead of assuming that women are naturally better resource managers, recognising that women's (and men's) roles in natural resource conservation are varied helps to identify other factors that influence conservation, including tenure security, access to information and complementary resources (such as cash, labour, or sanctioning authority) needed to protect and conserve resources for long-term food security. For example, providing women with secure land tenure may increase their incentive to invest in natural resources.

WHY DO MYTHS PERSIST?

While intended to highlight rural women's contributions to food security and natural resource management despite inequality and discrimination, these stylised facts promote stereotypes of women as either victims or saviours, treat women as a monolithic group, ignore the role of men, communities, and institutions, and provide a simplistic and even misleading basis for the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies and programmes to promote food security and advance gender equality.

Yet they persist. One reason is a lack of data: data on income and assets is often collected at the household level, and survey convention often defaults to treating a man as the household head and the sole owner of assets. Households are still frequently conceptualised as unitary – where all resources are pooled and the household head makes all the decisions. This neglects women's role in decision-making as well as the reality that, in a large number of households, many resources are jointly owned or controlled and many decisions are made jointly. Part of the persistence can be traced to the use of “scare tactics” in advocacy: exaggerated claims are often effective in rallying around a cause and attracting funding. Inertia plays a role: once a statistical system or a method for gathering and analysing data is in place, it is very hard to change. Finally, the myths all have an element of truth. Thus, challenging the myths is often viewed as challenging the importance of women in agriculture.

HOW COULD WE DO BETTER?

The first step is recognising that these four myths, despite their kernel of truth, are indeed unfounded. We need to stop using them, even if they are convenient, and to call out those who are using them. The second is to invest in better data collection, grounded in a deeper understanding of how households function and how men and women relate to each other and work together in different societies. The third is to learn from project experience so that we can design and implement better projects for women and their families – a new generation of nutrition-sensitive agricultural projects, for example, finds that involving men explicitly through community conversations or communication to change gender roles increases the success of projects. Finally, we need to work with both men and women to understand the constraints that each face, shaped by their gender roles and dynamics, as well as other forms of social difference.

Agnes Quisumbing and **Ruth Meinzen-Dick** are

Senior Research Fellows and **Sophie Theis** is a Research Analyst at the International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington DC, USA.

Cheryl Doss is an Associate Professor and Senior Departmental Lecturer in Development Economics at the University of Oxford, UK.

Contact: a.quisumbing@cgiar.org

For references, see online version of this article at: www.rural21.com