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BUILDING INCLUSIVE AND EMPOWERING AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS FOR RESILIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural communities face a range of shocks from animal disease and crop pest outbreaks to natural disasters, political conflicts, and health crises such as COVID-19. Women are often particularly vulnerable to such shocks given constraints they face in terms of access to information, household decision-making power, control over assets and resources, time burdens, and more. Enabling agricultural producers to recover from shocks and mitigate the risks of future threats requires technologies, practices, and policies that ensure women’s participation and access to benefits but also their empowerment to make strategic life choices. Necessary steps toward more inclusive agrifood systems include 1) increasing women’s decision-making power and control over resources and assets within households and communities, 2) raising women’s voices in key processes such as market negotiations, research, and political processes, and 3) including and considering women’s needs and preferences in the design of programs and institutions. By building more inclusive and empowering agricultural production systems, communities can better withstand crises and bounce back stronger, with benefits not only for women but for all of society.

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural communities face a range of shocks from animal disease and crop pest outbreaks to natural disasters, political conflicts, and health crises such as COVID-19. Women are often particularly vulnerable to such shocks given constraints they face that prevent them from engaging in agrifood systems on terms that are equitable and fair. However, women are also important agents of change and play key roles in helping their households and communities respond to shocks.

In many countries, women have less schooling than men, control fewer resources, have less decision-making power over household income, and face time constraints because of their triple burden of productive, domestic, and community responsibilities.¹ These gender differences shape men's and women's experiences of shocks and their abilities to respond. In Kenya, for example, gender disparities in access to information and awareness of climate-smart agricultural practices contribute to women's lower adoption rates of these practices.² Research also indicates that men and women perceive risks differently and therefore may prefer different coping mechanisms: women's concerns with health-related risks may make savings instruments more appealing while men's priorities related to agricultural production could be better addressed with index-based or other insurance mechanisms.³ Gender also intersects with other spheres of vulnerability and identity – including ethnicity, age, and poverty – to further impact how women engage in agrifood systems and their resilience to shocks and stressors. For instance, evidence from Nigeria suggests that youth face specific constraints in agriculture such as lack of capital, experience, and social networks to cope with climate shocks and other challenges, and young women in particular have less access to information and irrigation and are less likely to benefit from cooperative memberships.⁴

Enabling agricultural producers to recover from shocks and mitigate the risks of future threats requires technologies, practices, and policies that not only enable women to participate and benefit equally but also empower women, or expand their ability to make strategic life choices where they were previously denied that ability.⁵ The reach-benefit-empower framework⁶ – developed to distinguish between agricultural development project approaches that reach women as participants, those that benefit women, and those that contribute to empowering women – can be a useful lens to explore how agrifood systems can be transformed to be more inclusive and gender-equitable. Reaching women as participants does not ensure that they will benefit from a project, and if they do accrue benefits such as increased income or better nutrition, that does not ensure that they will be empowered to control that income or choose foods for their households.⁷ Measuring the effect of a program's ability to reach, benefit, or empower women will require indicators specific to each approach, such as tracking the number of women who participated in an agricultural project to measure reach, assessing women's nutritional outcomes to measure benefit, and examining dimensions of decision-making power or control over resources to measure empowerment.⁸

Ensuring that women's contributions to agrifood systems are recognized – by their families, communities, policymakers, and society more broadly – and that women can make strategic choices about their involvement in those systems has benefits for all of society, including helping communities better withstand crises and bounce back stronger. Women's empowerment can improve agricultural productivity, household food security and dietary quality, and maternal and child nutrition.^{9,10,11,12} Given the vital role that women play in agrifood systems for themselves and their families, it is imperative that they can engage equitably and that constraints on their empowerment be addressed through changes to policy, programming, and norms.

CREATING INCLUSIVE AND EMPOWERING AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS FOR WOMEN

Creating an inclusive and empowering agrifood system for women requires action in several key areas:

Increase women's decision-making power and control over resources and assets

Increasing women's decision-making power and control over assets within their households and communities is a key step toward inclusive agrifood systems. A recent systematic review finds that women's access to assets like credit, land, training, and transportation is limited, which reduces their choices and influences their ability to engage in more lucrative, larger scale activities.¹³ In some areas, men have moved out of agriculture or migrated away from rural areas, leading to a "feminization" of agriculture. This can present opportunities for women to

gain greater decision-making power and higher earnings in key parts of agrifood systems, but it can also increase women's workload and financial burdens.^{14,15,16}

One way that women's control over assets and decision-making power in agrifood systems can be supported is by enhancing their negotiating power vis-à-vis market actors through fair contracting or payment schemes. In Uganda, the Farm and Family Balance project is working with the country's largest sugarcane processing company to increase women's involvement in sugarcane marketing and management activities by encouraging the transfer or registration of a contract the parcel of land on which the sugarcane is grown from husbands to their wives. The contract entitles the wife to receive inputs on credit, cash advances, and the final payment associated with the block. Initial findings indicate that overall acceptance of the intervention was high (70 percent), suggesting that simple encouragement can effectively nudge men to include their wives in household commercial activities.¹⁷

Raise women's voices in key processes

In addition to ensuring that women's engagement in activities throughout the agrifood system is equitable and fair, it is critical that women's voices be heard in key processes related to agrifood systems, such as research and political engagement. Agricultural research for development is an essential pathway for agrifood system transformation, contributing to improved management practices, production, processing, transportation, and more. Women's priorities and preferences – such as for food crops with certain nutritional or taste qualities or that do not require excessive labor – must be part of the research process. In Kenya, GROOTS – a national movement of grassroots women-led community-based organizations – is working with the agricultural extension system to provide input on the types of climate-smart technologies preferred by the members.¹⁸ Recognizing women's needs and priorities in the early stages of research is an important step toward ensuring that women benefit from the results, particularly for technologies and practices that will enable communities to build resilience to future shocks.

Political mobilization is also a central avenue through which women's voices can influence the policies that shape the agrifood system. By voting or by becoming policymakers themselves, voicing support or dissent for key policies, and participating in other civic processes, women can affect the way agrifood systems operate. Evidence from India shows that women who belong to women's self-help groups are more politically engaged and make use of a greater number of public entitlement schemes that can help strengthen their and their households' livelihoods, food security, nutrition, and health.¹⁹

Enhance institutional support for women

Ensuring that institutions are supportive of women is another critical factor for inclusive agrifood systems. For example, formal laws and informal systems governing property rights impact women's abilities to invest in their land or businesses, access credit, and diversify their livelihoods. There is strong evidence that women's land rights affect the extent to which they make decisions about household consumption, human capital investment, and transferring resources to the next generation, though further research is needed to investigate these links more directly.²⁰

Financial institutions also hold great potential for empowering women and helping them build resilience, but when financial systems are not designed with women's needs and preferences in mind, they risk exacerbating gender wealth gaps. A partnership between CARE International, PostBank, and local partners in Uganda is seeking to address these challenges by introducing a mobile banking product specifically designed for women's priorities (such as saving for school fees or healthcare), providing financial counseling sessions, and integrating a research component to better understand factors affecting uptake of the program and users' experiences.²¹

Access to timely information is another critical factor to ensure women's equitable inclusion in agrifood systems. Women's access to information can be facilitated or inhibited by technologies, programs, or institutions. For instance, mobile phones can facilitate access to banking and government programs. They can also connect producers with information such as extension services or real-time updates on market prices and weather – information that is increasingly important in the context of climate change.²² Yet women own and use mobile phones at lower rates than men, and thus may have less access than men to services and information provided via mobile phones.

Ensuring that girls and women have equal access to educational and training opportunities and institutions is also essential for their inclusion and empowerment in agrifood systems.²³ Closing the gender gap in basic education can help the next generation of women break out of poverty and make informed and strategic choices about their livelihoods, the food they and their families consume, and the types of policies they demand from political leaders.

TAKING ACTION AND MOVING FORWARD

As agricultural households and communities face a range of threats and challenges, it is critical to ensure that the technologies, practices, and policies intended to enhance their resilience open opportunities for women without exacerbating existing gender gaps or putting additional burdens on them, such as increased labor or time demands. Evidence also suggests that approaches to empowering women must include working with men, both to prevent backlash against women's gains (such as gender-based violence or other retaliation) and to make sure that newly transformed gender norms are sustained.²⁴ By building more inclusive and empowering agricultural production systems, communities can better withstand crises and bounce back stronger, with benefits not only for women but for all of society.

For more information on the International Food Policy Research Institute's work on gender, visit <https://www.ifpri.org/topic/gender>.

ENDNOTES

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