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• FSN Forum •

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Transforming gender relations in agriculture through women's empowerment: benefits, challenges and trade-offs for improving nutrition outcomes

About this online discussion

This document summarizes the online discussion *Transforming gender relations in agriculture through women's empowerment: benefits, challenges and trade-offs for improving nutrition outcomes*, held on FAO's Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum) from 26 June to 15 July 2016, and facilitated by Nitya Rao, Nigel Poole, Barnali Chakraborty and Haris Gazdar from the Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA) programme.

The discussion aimed at gathering information on processes and good practices regarding policy changes that empower women in agriculture, and how these changes have altered women's and, subsequently, children's nutrition status. In addition, it specifically called for sharing experiences regarding women's roles in agriculture and agribusiness value chains in Afghanistan in order to inform interventions that recognize and support women's contribution to livelihood security.

Over the three weeks of discussion, participants from 16 countries shared 94 contributions. The discussion page had 2 866 page views, the highest number being from Italy (743), followed by India (532) and Bangladesh (291). The topic introduction and questions proposed, as well as all contributions received, are available on the discussion page:

www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/discussions/gender_childcare_nutrition

Introduction

Despite its unprecedented economic growth, South Asia remains the region with the highest rate of malnutrition in the world. Nutrition programmes have mainly targeted women given their central role in child care, but these have proven to be insufficient to tackle the issue. Also the potential of agriculture has not been fully exploited: while the sector significantly contributes to the livelihood of rural people in the region, it has generally been neglected in policy-making. The region of Sindh in Pakistan is illustrative in this regard: while 14 million acres are used for crop

production, still more than 71 percent of the households in the province are food insecure (Mehwish Iaghari).

However, policy-makers have increasingly recognized that agricultural growth and development alone do not necessarily lead to better nutrition outcomes. In thinking about how agricultural development could improve nutrition, the role of gender in agricultural production needs to be considered, as gendered divisions of labour in agriculture affect household nutrition in various ways (Malapit *et al.*, 2013, referred to by Santosh Kumar Mishra).

Data from Pakistan, for instance, demonstrate that children of mothers engaged in agricultural production are far more likely to be stunted than children whose mothers do not work; women involved in agricultural activities often have to choose between earning an income and taking care of their own and their children's health

([Haris Gazdar](#)). In formulating adequate interventions that target malnutrition, one should also take into account and recognize other gender-based divisions of labour at the household level: time spent in one activity directly affects the time available for others ([Mar Maestre](#)), which in turn has implications for household food security and nutrition.

Women's roles in agricultural production and household activities

Women constitute a significant part of the agricultural workforce in South Asian countries and are increasingly involved in pre- as well as post-harvest activities ([Md. Sirajul Islam](#)). Yet despite their significant contributions, women's labour is generally unpaid, as it is usually not considered an economic activity but rather an extension of women's household work ([Shahzad Hussain](#), [Muhammad Haseeb](#), [Haris Gazdar](#), [Mylene Rodríguez Leyton](#)). Even women themselves do not always value their role in agricultural production in terms of its contribution to household nutrition or generating income ([Barnali Chakraborty](#)). If labour is paid for, women usually receive much lower wages than men ([Haris Gazdar](#), [Md. Sirajul Islam](#)), while they often carry out the most tedious tasks ([Haris Gazdar](#)). In general, social and cultural norms often dictate the job opportunities women have ([Emile Hougbo](#), [Shirin Afroz](#), [Mustafa Nangraj](#)). However, gender divisions of work are not static; the introduction of the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) in India is illustrative in this regard. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu for example, the introduction of SRI and the accompanying implements

to facilitate weeding have led men to claim the right to do agricultural tasks which have traditionally been done by women. This has resulted in women losing their work in agriculture, which many of them actually don't want to give it up (except to engage in other, better-paid activities), having always been able to combine their different responsibilities with the help of elderly people or by bringing small children with them to the fields ([Joan Mencher](#)). Likewise, in the context of the Tejaswini Rural Women's Empowerment Program (see case studies box), men started to participate in the project after seeing the high yields and the mechanical weeders that were made available (traditionally, manual weeding has been regarded as a task for women). However, in this case the outcomes of the project have been positive: it has not caused women to lose their work, and it has actually given them more confidence and the opportunity to take on more leadership roles ([Ann Steensland](#)).

Besides spending a significant amount of time on the farm, women are also responsible for household chores, resulting in long working days ([Georgina Njiraini](#)) – up to 14 hours a day in India, for example ([Mahesh Maske](#)). These heavy workloads have a number of negative implications: they limit women's interactions outside of the family, restrain their mobility, and hamper their access to education and productive resources ([Shirin Afroz](#), [Mustafa Nangraj](#), [Mar Maestre](#)). However, being responsible for household tasks does not necessarily mean that women can freely decide how to carry them out. For instance, cultural and household dynamics limit women's freedom to choose the type of food for preparation, and in India women are typically the last of the family to eat ([Priya Rampal](#)). These aspects can contribute to malnutrition among women, which not only has a negative effect on women's productivity, but also poses a variety of health threats, especially for women of child-bearing age. Malnutrition prior to conception can negatively affect the health of the child by hampering healthy development of the foetus, which can result in low birth weight or even physical and cognitive impairments ([Hira Iftikhar](#)).



Policy recognition of women's roles for better nutrition outcomes

In order to effectively address nutritional problems, one needs to recognize that these often originate from social, cultural and economic factors; thus they can only be solved by bringing about changes affecting all three spheres, in particular at the household level (United Nations, 1990, referred to by Santosh Kumar Mishra). In this regard, participants widely agreed that it is of central importance to make men aware not only of women's contribution to household food security and nutrition, but also of the consequences of their heavy work burden, in order to create more equality in the sharing of household as well as agriculture-related responsibilities (Bhavani R. Vaidyanathan, Rohit Parasasr). However, when making gender a cross-cutting aspect in interventions, the following should be taken into account:

- **Empowerment projects should not contribute to overburdening women even more than they already are** (Nitya Rao, Md. Sirajul Islam). Often, the wide array of tasks women are involved in is overlooked. Increasing the participation of women in agriculture in order to achieve a project goal does not necessarily mean empowerment. One should rather focus on how to bring women into the decision-making process (Md. Sirajul Islam).
 - **Increased incomes for women do not necessarily mean that they are able to spend the money according to their choice.** Research on agricultural credit programmes of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) has shown that female beneficiaries of agricultural credits often hand over the money to their husbands, who subsequently decide how to spend it; in designing projects, these cultural aspects should be taken into account (Barnali Chakraborty), specifically given that women earners are likely to make more pro-nutrition consumption choices for the household. For women's income to be a factor in influencing consumption choices and nutrition outcomes, families need to acknowledge that a particular income stream belongs to a woman (Amna Akhtar).
 - **Projects need to target not just women, but in particular families with young children, in order to see nutrition outcomes.** Research on food security agricultural support projects in Cambodia and Malawi found that households traditionally eligible for agricultural support did not automatically include families with young children (Ramani Wijesinha-Bettoni).
 - **The role of other family members should not be overlooked.** In China for instance, fathers and grandparents play a vital role in the food intake of children suffering from malnutrition (Guo Cheng).
- Participants shared the following concrete suggestions to create an enabling environment for women and in turn have a positive effect on household nutrition outcomes:
- **Women's contribution to agriculture should be recognized by policy-makers and documented,** by making it part of national statistics, in order to ensure access to financial resources and agricultural inputs (Shahzad Hussain).
 - **The curriculum of agricultural universities should be made gender-sensitive** (Nitya Rao, Hira Iftikhar). For instance, the University of Faisalabad has launched women's empowerment and gender sensitization programmes focusing on agribusiness, health and sanitation, education, and malnutrition issues (Hira Iftikhar).
 - **Women's access to productive assets should be enhanced** (Muhammad Haseeb, Santosh Kumar Mishra, Mebit Kebede). An impact assessment of the USAID-funded Yekokeb Berhan Program in Ethiopia showed that female asset ownership and literacy were associated with a significantly higher probability of adopting a diverse diet than were agricultural income or production diversity (Mebit Kebede).
 - **Women's access to land should be improved.** Landless women should be allotted land (Shahzad Hussain); in particular, a Women Farmers' Entitlement Act is needed (Bhavani R. Vaidyanathan).
 - **Water rights for women should be promoted** (Georgina Njiraini).
 - **Women should get access to financial support** (Mebit Kebede) by means of government subsidies and access to financial services, like microfinance facilities (Shahzad Hussain). In addition, housewives should be trained in the best use of resources (Gustavo Aguilar Casas).
 - **Women should receive training on livestock and vegetable production,** with special attention for entrepreneurship skills (Shahzad Hussain).
 - **Women should be encouraged to establish women farmers' unions** (Shahzad Hussain).



- **Kitchen gardening should be introduced** at school in order to train students to grow fruit and vegetables at home ([Mustafa Nangraj](#)); the government and NGOs should also design training programmes for women ([Shahzad Hussain](#)).
- **Awareness-raising efforts regarding nutrition and nutrition education should be strengthened** ([Mahtab S. Bamji](#)), targeting women as well as men ([Bhavani R. Vaidyanathan](#)), and be in line with the local food culture and availability ([Nitya Rao](#)). Special attention should be paid to the importance of the first thousand days in a child's life in terms of dietary diversity ([Priya Rampal](#)). Health workers, for instance, should be trained in raising awareness and building capacity among women regarding the production and preparation of healthy food ([Mustafa Nangraj](#)).
- **Healthier heating practices for cooking should be promoted.** In India, many women use biomass stoves

for cooking, which causes severe health problems: around 600 000 women die every year because of the smoke from the stoves. Efficient stoves need thus to be introduced in order to address these health problems ([Bibhu Prasad Mohanty](#)).

- **The cultivation of biofortified crops should be promoted** ([Abdul Mazid, Nigel Poole](#)), and biofortified products should be made available at cheaper prices, so that all people can overcome micronutrient deficiencies and hidden hunger ([Hira Iftikhar](#)).

In thinking about interventions to address the specific issue of unpaid care work, the following ideas were shared:

- **Social protection programmes should recognize the role of women as caregivers and the burden that this role can create.** When women are for instance made responsible for complying with the conditions of a cash transfer programme, or when they are required to travel to collect the benefits or participate in the programme, their domestic unpaid workload increases. If this is not addressed in the programme design, the increased burden on women may further undermine their own welfare, which discourages participation in the programme ([Social Protection & Human Rights, 2015, referred to by Santosh Kumar Mishra](#)).
- **Investments in time-saving technologies would allow free time to be reprioritized for the important aspects of child care and nutrition.** For instance, investment in water infrastructure would save time in cases where women have to travel long distances to fetch water ([Georgina Njiraini](#)).

• CASE STUDIES SHARED BY PARTICIPANTS •

Bangladesh

Nurturing Connections, a Helen Keller International (HKI) project, aims to challenge cultural norms that constrain women's access to the production system, and which thus hamper improved nutrition. It establishes a safe space in which all family members can discuss intrahousehold gender inequalities that underlie food security issues and malnutrition. In Nilphamari the project results have been positive: the number of women indicating they have a say in child health care has risen from 33 to 97 percent, and the percentage of women receiving support from husbands with cooking has risen from 8 to 30 percent ([Shirin Afroz](#)).

Another HKI project promoted **homestead food production** (HFP), which is known for reducing women's dependency on male family members who would normally buy vegetables and for increasing the amount of money spent on activities benefitting women and children, because women usually control the income generated. To help households cope with the consequences of a changing climate, trainings were offered on how to produce more varieties in small water-prone areas, on poultry rearing, and on marketing skills. Additionally, mothers benefitted from nutrition education. A significant reduction from 76 to 23 percent of inadequate diets among pregnant women was observed ([Amin Uddin](#)).

India

Swayam Shikshan Prayog's sustainable agriculture programme aims to empower female farmers in the drought-prone areas of Vidharba and Marathwada. Its strategy includes the following elements: increasing knowledge of techniques for sustainable, nutrition-sensitive agricultural production; raising awareness of (water) hygiene to reduce the risk of diseases and to improve nutrient absorption; increasing recognition for women's contribution in agriculture together with an increase in their decision-making power; building capacity of female farmers by providing leadership training; and promoting active women leaders who link women farmers' groups to government schemes and programmes ([Anjali Verma](#)).

Under the IFAD-supported **Tejaswini Rural Women's Empowerment Program** in Madhya Pradesh, 12 442 self-help groups (SHG) have been established, providing a platform for discussions on social and gender equity, skills and leadership training, and the establishment of savings groups. An important achievement of the project has been the election of 1 809 SHG members to Panchayati Raj Institutions (assemblies that develop economic and social plans), of which the majority have been women. In addition, the project introduced the System of Rice Intensification for women farmers. When productivity turned out to be high, people in the village became more open to new ideas and started to grow a wider variety of crops and make collective decisions about agricultural production. As a result of the project, food security has improved and occasional food shortages have been reduced for 86 percent of the participating households. In the Gandhar village for example, child malnutrition has almost disappeared ([Ann Steensland](#)).

In Maharashtra, the time-consuming and back-breaking labour of manual cotton-picking has been made easier through the design of an **ergonomic cotton-picking bag** for women, by the Central Institute for Cotton Research. Women farmers have reported pain reductions in their wrists, upper back and shoulders. Also, because the bags are more amenable for tying, picking, carrying and emptying, women have been able to harvest more cotton per day ([Mahesh Maske](#)).

An initiative of the National Rural Livelihood Mission aims to **promote traditional crop cultivation** in order to improve the production of tribal women farmers in South India. By distributing native seed varieties of inter alia pulses for subsistence farming, the project aims to help meet the nutritional demands of the family ([Dhanya Praveen](#)).

Pakistan

In the context of the Australia-Pakistan Agriculture Sector Linkages Program, a **Female Entrepreneurship Center** was established in Sindh in which product-based groups were established for entrepreneurship-based training in the value addition of mango, vegetables, etc. During the project market linkages were developed as well, and after the training women started their own business. In addition, a Female Agriculture & Livestock Entrepreneurship Services model was developed: two women were selected and trained for providing extension services to other women in order to support them in starting their own business ([Mustafa Nangraj](#)).



Gender-sensitive programmes for improved nutrition in Africa

Participants mentioned various projects that have been implemented in Africa, but might be suitable for replication in South Asian countries:

Biofortified crops in Uganda and Liberia

BRAC International has developed biofortified crops like vitamin A-rich, orange-fleshed sweet potatoes and iron-rich beans in Uganda, and iron-rich cassava in Liberia. In this context, more than 16 000 Ugandan farmers, most of them women, have benefitted from the distribution of disease-free vines of the sweet potatoes and accompanying extension services. In promoting the cultivation and consumption of these biofortified crops, the project has mainly targeted children under five years of age, adolescent girls, and pregnant and lactating women ([Abdul Mazid](#)).

Dimitra Clubs in the Niger

FAO's Dimitra Clubs are gender-sensitive communication spaces where men and women discuss development challenges, mainly in the field of agriculture and nutrition, and take collective action to address them. In the Niger, the clubs formed the entry point for the activities conducted in the context of the UN programme "Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women". This programme included trainings on nutrition in which participants identified local, nutritious foods that then had to be labelled "energetic", "constructive" or "protective"; the importance of including all three in one dish was highlighted during cooking classes. Participants were also encouraged to think about solutions for periods in which nutritious crops are not available, which resulted in the identification of new conservation and processing methods. The project led to the diversification of diets in several households ([Ghady Chedrawi](#)).

School garden programmes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

This FAO programme seeks to improve the nutrition of schoolchildren while simultaneously teaching them how to cultivate nutritious food. In addition, parents involved in the project through parent committees benefit financially by selling the produce; as they are also supplied with seeds for their own use, they are able to grow vegetables at home as well. The project has adopted the Farmer Field School approach, which takes into account gender aspects; this has allowed and empowered women to publicly express themselves, to coordinate project groups, and to eventually become agricultural entrepreneurs ([Tiphaine Bueke](#)).

Women's empowerment in Afghanistan: experiences and opportunities

Afghan women have traditionally been involved in family-based agricultural and livestock production. While they have significant practical experience, they often lack a theoretical background because very few of them have pursued agriculture-oriented studies. In identifying how to empower Afghan women, discussion participants thus mentioned the necessity of providing education ([Atiqullah Khan](#)), practical training and capacity-building activities ([Eng Shah Wali](#), [Muqem Shah Miakheel](#), [Frozan Darwish](#)). Additionally, combining these aspects with connecting women to markets would enable them to engage in commercial production, which was mentioned as a sustainable approach to improve the societal status of women ([Muqem Shah Miakheel](#), [Frozan Darwish](#)). Several initiatives have already been undertaken to empower rural women:

Poultry production

Various poultry production projects have been implemented in Afghanistan, and are considered an important first step in overcoming poverty. They supply nutritious food and generate income that can be invested in other income-earning activities. The following particular advantages of poultry production were mentioned:

- It does not require land ownership.
- Only limited capital investment is needed.
- It generates quick financial returns ([Mohammed Jafar Emal](#)).
- It allows women to carry out the activities at home ([Nigel Poole](#), [Mohammad Jafar Emal](#)).
- Scavenging, kitchen waste, etc. can provide feed.
- Cross-bred pullets that are well adapted to the Afghan rural environment are locally available and popular.

The IFAD-supported Backyard Poultry Development Project, which targets rural women and has been implemented in the north of Afghanistan since 2010, has achieved very positive results. Besides supplying an extra source of nutrition, the project generates income through the sale of eggs and pullets; the sale of products is facilitated by the establishment of Women Poultry Associations. In order to ensure project sustainability, attention was paid to investing the income in the creation of other income-earning opportunities, for instance by buying sheep, goats or tailoring machines. Eventually, 15 percent of the project beneficiaries were able to establish other income-earning activities in this way ([Mohammad Jafar Emal](#)).

Seed production

Traditionally, seed production has been seen as a task for male farmers, but the Afghan Government and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) have joined forces to encourage women's active engagement in the sector. By involving male family members and convincing them to allow the women to participate in the so-called Village Based Seed Enterprise (VBSE) project, four of these enterprises were established in Kabul and Logar; two (one women-led and one mixed-gender) were formed in Parwan province. Being provided with foundation seeds and fertilizer, women were able to produce certified seeds for distribution to other areas. Eventually, the project also enabled women to become members of organizations that previously only consisted of male members. While the land tenure system has restricted women's land ownership and has thus in turn hampered possibilities for engagement in seed production, farmers have been trying to overcome this problem through land consolidation and the lease of land from institutions like churches ([Frozan Darwish](#)).

Integrated Dairy Schemes Project (IDS)

The central role of Afghan women in the national dairy sector has been supported by FAO since 2005, through its Integrated Dairy Schemes Project that aims to promote food security. So far, four milk-processing plants have been established in Herat, Kabul, Kunduz and Mazar-I Sharif, which have benefitted 5 700 smallholder farm families ([Regina Laub](#)). Taking into account the different roles of men and women in Afghanistan's livestock sector, the project has had a strong empowering effect on women beneficiaries, who have been able to retain, manage and spend almost 90 percent of the weekly cash income generated from selling milk in the village. Thanks to trainings provided through the project, farmers have been able to improve their cattle breeds and feeding, which has increased the number of cows they own. Women also directly benefit from better-fed cattle since these produce more dung, which can be used as fertilizer and reduces the need to collect fuelwood, and likewise the workload and risks for women associated with its collection. Furthermore, training sessions have proven to be crucial to women's empowerment: their bargaining power within the household and community has improved, as has their ability to spend money on what they themselves consider priorities, such as education for children and improved nutrition for the family ([FAO, 2015a, shared by Regina Laub](#)).

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VIDEOS

ECHO Tropical Fruits Video Series – Grafting Tropical Fruit Trees & Avocados (Part 2 of 6)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BbSjTVEDCc>

FAO-Dimitra Clubs in DR Congo: Food Security and Nutrition

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHG07gQ2H8Q&feature=youtu.be>

WEBSITES

Food Sovereignty Prize

<http://foodsovereigntyprize.org/fs-prize>

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