

## Pathways for women's empowerment in agriculture in South and Southeast Asia



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The agrarian sectors in South and Southeast Asia are in rapid transition as development efforts intend to increase productivity through large-scale investments, new technological applications and, increasingly, sustainable farming methods. These transitions aim to benefit the larger economy while at the same time reduce poverty. More recently, they include the goal of women's economic empowerment, or WEE.

This focus on women's economic empowerment has gained traction and is the leading approach to addressing gender gaps in economic spheres, including agriculture. WEE strategies promote women's access to the labour market and business development, as they integrate gender dimensions along the value chains of agricultural products. The assumption is that including women's economic empowerment in projects and programmes will produce more gender equality in outcomes, such as ending unequal access to productive resources, market opportunities and paid employment.

However, economic empowerment does not lead straight to gender equality. Systemic barriers and patriarchal social norms still impede women from realizing their rights in the agriculture sector or benefiting from sustainability initiatives. To contribute to the elimination of existing inequalities, this brief examines persistent barriers to gender equality in agrarian contexts, asks how projects and programmes designed to promote women's empowerment are implemented and makes key recommendations to close gaps in current approaches.

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The brief is based on recent Stockholm Environment Institute work and draws on literature reviews on women's economic empowerment in rice value chains in Cambodia, Pakistan and Vietnam, as well as a literature review and interviews with participants of a home gardening project on gender power relations in rural Cambodia (Nguyen et al. 2017; Nguyen and Mortensen forthcoming).

### **Persistent barriers to gender equality in agrarian contexts**

Women farmers are a diverse group, and their experiences in the agricultural sector are varied, depending on factors such as age, marital status, class, ethnicity, religion and location. However, four elements stand out that serve as impediments:

- **Women continue to be regarded as secondary farm labour despite their principal contributions.** Men are persistently assumed to be de facto heads of households and principal earners. With this power distribution, women's more limited access to information,

Photo (above): Vegetable gardeners  
in Cambodia enthusiastically  
contributing to an SEI workshop  
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property and financial resources limits their roles to the level of employees or helpers in the value chain. This is seen in areas of Pakistan, such as Punjab Province, where men are considered the principal rice farmers, yet, rice production is heavily subsidized by women's unpaid and low-valued labour (Samee et al. 2015). Women engage in tasks such as seed transplanting and weeding, tasks considered too harsh for men due to many hours of bending (Nizami et al. 2016). Similarly, in Vietnam, women whose husbands have out-migrated are also found to engage in the heavy tasks of rice farming such as land preparation and applying fertilizers that are traditionally perceived as male tasks. Yet, higher value is accorded to male efforts resulting in gender wage gaps even when women perform the same tasks as men (Paris and Truong 2005).

- **Women's legal access to resources does not always produce control over their use.** Programmes and policy measures tend to focus primarily on increasing women's access to resources such as natural assets, technology, skills training and credit-based loans. Yet, equal access rights do not always produce equal outcomes. In Cambodia, patriarchal practices that commonly assign asset ownership to men rather than women combine with high levels of illiteracy to produce the result of women who are sometimes unaware of their joint ownership and their right to inherit land. Unaddressed constraints to women's control over resources further include social norms that privilege the status of men in agricultural production, which in Cambodia often gives men exclusive rights to control the use of the land (SIGI 2018). Consequently, women have less influence in decisions about changes in land-use and adoption of new technologies. One outcome of this power imbalance results when male heads of farming households decide to exploit women's unpaid or cheap labour rather than investing in machinery. Such decisions deprive the women, and the households, of technological improvements that can also benefit human and environmental health, as documented in Pakistan (Samee et al. 2015). Technology improvements however, can affect separate groups of women differently, as observed in Vietnam, where introduction of drum seeders eased the weeding tasks of women in rice-farming households, while depriving landless women of their jobs in hand-weeding (Gallina and Farnworth 2016).
- **Women's economic participation is confined to the lower levels of the value chain.** Women provide more than half of Asia's labour input in agriculture, yet social norms and practices associating women with domestic work prevent access to the lucrative stages in agricultural value chains such as trading. Instead, huge economic benefits are captured by elite, most often male, actors. There are very few women managing rice export companies, for instance, and women's representation in the Cambodian Rice Federation is just two out of 200 members (ASEAN 2016). Women's businesses are often small and tend to be concentrated in small rice mills and retail and wholesale functions, with larger operations dominated by men. While Cambodian men often are in charge of working with collectors and buyers of important crops such as rice (World Bank 2015), Vietnamese women have more influential roles in managing sales. Thus, men often cannot make important market decisions without consulting their wives (Paris et al. 2009). Yet, due to higher mobility and freedom from domestic chores, the majority of traders in Vietnam are men, concentrated in rice trading companies that control rice prices. For example, research on rice value chains in the Mekong Delta, found that 80% of traders or collectors are middle-aged men (Chen et al. 2013).
- **Agricultural policies and implementation sideline gender and power issues.** Policy support to rice value chains primarily targets and benefits actors in downstream parts, such as processors and traders, who are mostly men. For example, price regulation policies in Vietnam benefit rice traders but do not reduce production costs for small rice producers (Chen et al. 2013). Further, some agricultural policies are largely blind to gender and power issues. In Vietnam, for example, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) has omitted gender from its Rural Development Strategy 2010-2020 and deployed the responsibility of mainstreaming gender to the Women's Union. Yet, the Women's Union does not have resources, capacity or authority to intervene in MARD strategies, and there has been no systematic inter-agency collaboration. Cambodia, however, has a more enabling policy environment for gender mainstreaming that aims to narrow gender gaps in

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access to, and control of, land and water resources led by the Ministry of Women's Affairs. For instance, the 2015 Agricultural Extension Policy promotes the recruitment of women and establishes monitoring for gender targets. However, enforcement of these policies is weak, partly due to the lack of gender-related policy targets, accountability, and monitoring mechanisms (SIGI 2018). Currently, policy measures that support women's economic empowerment focus on improving the productive work of women, without adequately challenging the barriers that continues to disadvantage women.

## Gaps in current approaches to women's economic empowerment

Economic, political and cultural drivers of gender inequality and patriarchal norms and practices adversely affect women's agency: their ability to gain equal access to, and control over, resources and decision-making. These norms and practices place women in the lowest paid links of the value chains. Yet, increasing women's participation in value chains without targeting the fundamental factors that fuel gender inequality will not fully benefit women or lead to their empowerment. As a case in point, research by Kabeer and Natali (2013) found that there is no win-win relationship between economic growth and gender equality. While women's entry into the labour market contributes significantly to productivity gains and economic growth, the outcomes of economic growth do not necessarily reciprocate by leading to gender equality. Women's empowerment and gender equality are not directly a result of economic growth nor can they be tied to inclusion in the market.

Many projects that focus mostly on employing women in the production assembly line or value chains to boost productivity or create a more efficient labour force sidestep the fact that women experience discriminatory practices and shoulder heavier caregiving responsibilities. In short, there is no recognition of the power relations construct within which women live their everyday lives.

Many projects and programmes further identify women's agency as the number of women in deliberative arenas but stop short of enabling women's understanding of the political and cultural factors that cause their disadvantage and marginal status as a first step in transformative awareness. Critical to women's empowerment is building their ability to act upon and address these marginalizing factors. Without challenging the economic, political and cultural structures of inequality that grant privileged status to particular groups of men at multiple scales, the power imbalances that marginalize women – especially rural, ethnic, or poor women – will not change.

## How do we position women's empowerment in agrarian contexts?

Transitions towards a green, sustainable agricultural sector offer opportunities to challenge existing gender norms. But to unleash the potentials of an empowering sustainable agricultural sector, policymakers, researchers, NGOs and businesses will need to:

- **Position gender and social equality as a central, integral and necessary component of projects and programmes.** This re-positioning must consider why women – reflecting multiple and intersecting identities as mothers, wives, daughters, carers, ethnic and sexual minorities, and classes – are economically and socially disadvantaged in the first place. Following this, projects and programmes should examine discriminatory practices and biases that constrain women from benefiting fully from their involvement in agricultural production.
- **Facilitate negotiations of power.** Projects and programmes should expand the concept of agency to enhance women's and men's awareness of unequal power relations including wider political, economic and cultural causes of inequalities; to enable their ability to determine their own development pathways; and to support their capacity to mobilize

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or participate in collective actions to negotiate for better and just terms of benefits and returns. This includes, for example, gender-sensitive technical training and awareness-raising processes to discuss the rights of women.

- **Increase women's ability to organize or participate in collective actions.** This can act as an important platform to discuss inequalities, build solidarity, provide mutual support and develop business plans in relation to agricultural value chains. These groups should be supported in advancing the feminist agendas that respect free speech and choice and the struggles against economic, political and cultural drivers of gender and social inequality. This includes building capacity for women's groups to reflect on challenges in working together and with others, to take action to overcome these challenges, and to identify and nurture leaders and principled leadership.
- **Support gender responsive policy implementation.** Agricultural, rural development and gender stand-alone ministerial bodies, regional organizations and networks should create complementary policies and agendas that challenge underlying and inhibiting social norms to improve women's status and well-being. Women's Ministries, Unions and Civil Society Organizations working on gender and women's leadership development issues should be engaged at all stages in the planning and implementation of agricultural development projects. This will ensure gender issues are included and existing gender equality commitments are not overlooked.



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