

Factsheet: Women Farmers and Food Security

Bottom line

People's overall access to food is very dependent on the work of rural women. Women farmers produce the majority of food. Women are also responsible for ensuring that their families' basic needs are met. Women's access to financial services, agricultural extension, education, health care and human rights are, therefore, key to assuring food security for all.

Women and food production

- The FAO estimates that women produce over 50 percent of all food grown worldwide.¹
- In sub-Saharan Africa, women grow 80-90 percent of the food.²
- African women work far longer hours than men. On average, their workdays may be 50 percent longer according to the World Bank.³
- Women carry out essential work such as hoeing, planting, weeding and harvesting with simple tools and little outside assistance.⁴
- In sub-Saharan Africa, when women obtain the same farm inputs as average male farmers, they increase their yields for maize, beans and cowpeas by 22 percent.⁵
- In Kenya, where the amount of education women receive is extremely low, a year of primary education provided to all women farmers would boost maize yields by 24 percent.⁶
- Despite the critical role they play in food production and management of natural resources, they have ownership of only 1 percent of the land. Lack of access to and control over land has intensified women's difficulties, their access to credit, technical assistance and participation, all essential for development.⁷
 - Little access to credit limits their ability to purchase seeds, fertilizers and other inputs needed to adopt new farming techniques.⁸
 - The use of rudimentary tools still accounts for more than 75 percent of Africa's food production.⁹
 - There is a gap between manufacturers of agricultural implements and poor women farmers, who are probably the main users of many hand tools those manufacturers produce.¹⁰
 - Only 5 percent of the resources provided through extension services in Africa are available to women.¹¹
 - Agricultural extension strategies traditionally have focused on increasing production of cash crops by providing men with training, information, and access to inputs and services.¹²

Women and meeting basic needs

- Women bear the primary responsibility for their families' health, education and nutrition.¹³

- In addition to their prominence in agriculture, women bear the brunt of domestic tasks: processing food crops, providing water and firewood, picking fruit, preparing and cooking food, caring for children, the elderly and the sick.¹⁴ In Africa, this latter activity assuming much greater significance in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.¹⁵
- Surveys of rural travel and transport patterns in villages in Burkina Faso, Uganda, and Zambia have found that African women move, on average, usually via headloading, 26 metric ton-kilometers a year (especially water and fuel wood), compared with less than 7 metric ton-kilometers for men. This, combined with women's contribution to agriculture, has led to estimates that women contribute about 2/3 of the total rural transport effort.¹⁶

Women and natural resources/bio-diversity

- Biodiversity, the variation of life forms within a given ecosystem, has been acknowledged for its importance for food security.¹⁷
- Biodiversity has been declining to the point at which, currently, just twelve crops and fourteen animal species now provide most of the world's food.¹⁸
- As a result of the loss of this biodiversity the world's food supply becomes more vulnerable and unsustainable. Agriculture becomes less able to adapt to environmental challenges, such as climate change or water scarcity.¹⁹
- The Convention on Biodiversity, an international treaty signed by 191 of the world's countries "*recognizes the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and affirm[s] the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation*".²⁰
- Rural women, in their role of farmers, are key to maintaining biodiversity. They improve and adapt plant varieties, cultivate plants, and store and exchange seeds.²¹
- In most communities, women hold the most reliable knowledge about promoting food security, preserving threatened food supplies, and ensuring their families' survival in the face of shortages.²²
- A recently released atlas on Africa, released by the UN's Environment Program (UNEP), a major loss of biodiversity is occurring in 34 African countries. Deforestation is a major concern in 35 African countries and land degradation is similarly a major worry for 32 African countries.²³
- In April 2008, the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology (IAASTD) released an independent, four-year study conducted by over 400 experts. The study was co-sponsored by the World Bank and multiple agencies of the United Nations and endorsed by over 60 governments. It confirms that large-scale, chemical-intensive agriculture is a major contributor to pollution, climate change, deforestation, social inequity, and the destruction of diversity, both biological and cultural. The study urges a fundamental overhaul of agricultural policy towards sustainable farming, including small-scale and organic agriculture.²⁴
- The IAASTD report also cites numerous other credible studies demonstrating that small-holder organic farms can produce enough food for the global population and avoid the environmental destruction associated with industrial agriculture.²⁵

- The negative outcomes of the loss and/or degradation of natural resources often fall most heavily on women, adding to their responsibilities and multiple roles in families and communities. However, in many situations women also hold the key to solving these problems and can bring environmental concerns to the attention of society in a powerful way.²⁶

Women and population growth

- Access to safe and effective contraception and other family planning services are essential components of food security. Whether or not a woman can control the number and timing of her children is crucial in determining both their level of nutrition and the amount of free time that she can devote to food production and preparation.²⁷

The current food price crisis facts

- Global prices for cereals and oils roughly doubled from 2005 to 2007, with increases up to 54 percent in 2008.²⁸ This price explosion spawned riots and protests in numerous countries over the last six months. The list of affected nations includes smaller states such as Haiti and Burkina Faso and larger ones such as India, Egypt, and Indonesia.²⁹
- Countries that are also suffering the misfortune of a poor harvest—such as Ethiopia or Somalia—or a country that is highly dependent on imports—such as Mauritania or Mozambique—are finding their population in deep jeopardy.³⁰
- The people hit the hardest are those already living in poverty. In rich countries, people spend 10-20 percent of their income on food. In many poor countries, citizens already spend 60 percent, sometimes even 80 percent, of their budget on food.³¹
- Because of these circumstances, people living in poverty are eating less food of less nutritional value.³² Pregnant women and young mothers are forgoing medical care. More women are turning to prostitution to pay for food. And more families are pulling children -- especially girls -- out of school, unable to afford fees and clothes.³³
- The crisis is also causing families to sell off productive assets, compromising their ability to escape long-term poverty out of short-term desperation.³⁴
- UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's stated this past July that the crisis is *"having the greatest impact on the most vulnerable countries and vulnerable people -- women and children, especially in Africa."*³⁵
- Women are suffering particularly because, in some African countries, women eat last as a cultural tradition, and when there is less food, women are the first to eat less.³⁶
- This month, The U.N. Special Investigator on the Right To Food, Olivier De Schutter, said soaring food prices have declined somewhat, but the crisis remains. De Schutter stated that the poor are hungry and malnourished not because there is no food, but because they cannot afford to buy the food that is available. He says governments must take steps to protect their people from the emerging threats to the right to adequate food. For example, he says they must provide their poor with social safety nets and make sure rural women have the same rights as men to access land and other productive resources.³⁷

- According the 2008/9 Progress of the World's Women, just released this month by UNIFEM, the food crisis “*had a severe effect on women, who not only assume primary responsibility for feeding their families but also contribute significantly to food production...Food security will not be achieved without accountability of all the major actors in agriculture markets to the poor in general and to women in particular.*”³⁸

Recent International Commitments

- In their statement on food security, The G8 group of countries committed, this past January to US\$10 billion to support food aid, nutrition interventions, social protection activities and measures to increase agricultural output in affected countries.³⁹
 - They have also committed to: look for opportunities to help build up local agriculture by promoting local purchase of food aid; reverse the overall decline of aid and investment in the agricultural sector; promote agricultural research and development; develop food security early warning systems; ensure the compatibility of policies for the sustainable production and use of biofuels with food security; and to achieve significant increases in support of developing country initiatives, including - in Africa - through full and effective implementation of the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) amongst other commitments.⁴⁰
 - The G8 statement does not mention women.⁴¹
- The CAADP, was endorsed by African Heads of State and Government in 2005. It sets time-bound targets including improving agricultural activity, particularly by focusing on small-scale farmers and women.⁴²
- This past August, the South African Development Community (SADC), comprised of Angola; Botswana; the Democratic Republic of Congo; Lesotho; Madagascar; Malawi; Mauritius; Mozambique; Namibia; South Africa; Swaziland; United Republic of Tanzania; Zambia and Zimbabwe, signed the Gender and Development Protocol. The protocol requires member states to:
 - enshrine gender equality in their constitutions;
 - review, amend and repeal laws that discriminate on the ground of sex; reduce maternal mortality by 75 percent;
 - develop gender-sensitive strategies to prevent new HIV infections and ensure universal access to HIV and AIDS treatment; ensure gender parity in political representation;
 - adopt policies and enact laws that would ensure equal access to economic resources by women and men;
 - enact and enforce legislation prohibiting all forms of gender-based violence;
 - and review and reform criminal laws applicable to cases of sexual offenses and gender-based violence by 2015.

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