Empowering rural women through innovation

Rapid economic growth, demographic shifts, urbanization, digitalization and increasingly globalized markets drive deep and fast structural transformation in Asia and the Pacific. Advances in agricultural innovation are crucial to support rural livelihoods while addressing future food and climate challenges.

All over Asia women are the backbone of our food systems; they farm, fish, prepare food, process and market our produce, and continue to play a key role in the reproduction of farming communities, taking responsibility for most of the care and social work. While women are involved in crucial work in agriculture and natural resource management and bear most of the responsibility for all the care and domestic work that supports the reproduction of rural households; nonetheless, they continue to face multiple constraints that undermine their human potential and ability to engage meaningfully and profitably in agriculture and rural development. The persistence of gender inequalities in access to and control over critical resources, including land, and access to decent employment opportunities, services and knowledge and technologies, among others, hinders women’s empowerment and affects the agricultural sector.

Innovation in agriculture has the potential to address some of the constraints that rural women face both in their productive activities as well as in performing the domestic and care work. However, innovation needs to be designed for and made fully accessible to women in order to have a positive impact on them and not to exacerbate the existing gender gaps. More in general, innovation that works for family farmers must become a higher priority of governments and other development partners. Without women’s full participation and agency, agriculture’s potential role in promoting inclusive rural development and achieving food and nutrition security and sustainable management of natural resources for all remains unrealized. This issue of the Gender Newsletter presents innovative solutions responding to the region’s socio-economic transformations, which can be easily and sustainably replicated across countries.

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Empowering women through ICT

The digital revolution has changed the way we work, access information and connect with each other. It offers new opportunities to those who can use the new technologies, but also presents new challenges for those who are at risk of being left behind, including women.

While technology alone cannot provide answers to some of the global challenges that affect food and agriculture nor empower rural women, it can increase options for women and make it easier to deploy effective solutions that contribute to inclusive and gender-responsive agricultural and rural development.

Only 41% of women in low- and middle income countries own mobile phones compared to 46 percent of men.

Information and Communication Technology in particular has the potential to contribute to women’s empowerment, provided that some conditions are met. FAO has recently identified the following success factors that can make ICT an enabler of rural women’s empowerment:

5 key success factors

- Understand the context: capturing Gender Bias

Tackling the root causes of gender equality and obstacles that hold back the productivity of female farmers and consider technology and innovation options to boost broader economic growth and rural development. These include the burden of domestic care work, gaps in educational attainment, gender inequality in control over land, scarcity of household farm labor, and limited access to resources and market opportunities.

Recommendations:
- Conduct gender analyses to captures women’s barriers in access and use of technologies and abilities to develop innovations.

- Provide adequate data to inform policy, project and programme choices

Gender-disaggregated data on agricultural productivity and the nexus to technology and innovation is currently limited. There is a need for solid and reliable statistics to establish baseline information on gender bias, as collecting sex disaggregated data on the division of labour to highlight invisible work and inform policy development to facilitate the development of focused policy and strategies to address women’s needs more effectively.

Recommendation:
- Integrate gender-responsive indicators to measure access and use of technologies into data collection requirements.
- Assess baseline indicators for all strategies, policies and plans related to technology and innovation -provide evidence based publications and data to public and organisations

- Integrate a gender perspective into strategies, policies and budgets

Strategies, policies, plans and budgets that explicitly address women’s needs and constraints related to technology and innovations are essential if stakeholders are to tackle the gender gap effectively.

Recommendations:
- Gender assessment on existing policies, projects and programs
- Establish gender equality targets in consultation of women’s organizations and local communities.

- Ensure sustainability

- Enabling environment: Build partnerships, provide technical assistance and capacity development

Innovation should involve different social, organizational or institutional processes, ranging from access to markets, credit or extension services to marketing produce in a new way.

Recommendations:
- Guarantee women’s and their organizations participation in decision making processes
- Invest in capacity development that increase women’s skills and ensure women are considered in existing capacity building initiatives
- Awareness raising of the value innovations and technology have to women to provide the right blend of opportunities
- Develop relevant and useful content and services by including women in the strategies and programs design

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

FAO publication on Gender and ICTs: “Mainstreaming gender in the use of ICTs for agriculture and rural development”

Based on the result of a 2018 desk study, online fora on gender in the framework of the e-Agriculture Community of Practice, and a review of several projects and programmes, this FAO publication on Gender and ICTs presents challenges and success factors, and an overview of the barriers to women’s access to, control and use of ICTs.

It offers a series of recommendations for better integration of gender in ICT initiatives, based on seven identified critical factors of success, illustrated through concrete examples (see box).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:
From impoverished to empowered: Sri Lankan women adopt modern biomass technologies

In developing countries some 2.5 billion people are forced to rely on biomass-fuelwood, charcoal and animal dung-to meet their energy needs. These people are energy poor, in that they have an absence of choices in the energy they access or use in their daily lives. Therefore, biomass plays an enormously important role in their lives, in the form of wood for cooking and heating.

To mitigate this need, the United Nations General Assembly designated 2012 as the International Year of Sustainable Energy for All with three interlinked objectives: to ensure universal access to modern energy services; to double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency; and to double the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix.

By 2017, the progress to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all as set in the Sustainable Development Agenda in 2016, fell short of its targets.

Globally, 85.3 percent of the population had access to electricity in 2014, an increase of only 0.3 percentage points since 2012. That means that 1.06 billion people, predominantly rural dwellers, still function without electricity. In East Asia and the Pacific region 96.6% of the population has access to electrify, varying from countries with a 100% coverage as Thailand or Malaysia to only 22.9% in Papua New Guinea or57% in Myanmar in 2016.

Access to clean fuels and technologies for cooking climbed to 57.4 percent in 2014, up slightly from 56.5 percent in 2012. However, more than three billion people, the majority of them in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, are still cooking without clean fuels and technologies that are more efficient.

Energy and the gender gap

One of the key aspects of economic poverty is related to energy. Energy poverty disproportionately affects women who are primarily responsible for collecting fuel and water at a community level. The use of modern biomass energy sources can go a great deal in addressing this gap In addition, women can also improve the livelihoods of their families through various small-scale entrepreneurial projects that use renewable energy.

A Sri Lanka perspective: How women upscaled their fish drying business

In Sri Lanka, rural women play a significant role in economic and social development, contributing to the wellbeing of their families and communities. Many of these women manage their household expenses through small-scale entrepreneurial businesses wherefore they use biomass energy, in particular fuelwood.

To alleviate the dependency on fuelwood, a renewable energy project called Promoting Modern Sustainable Biomass Energy conducted by the Ministry of Power and Renewable Energy together with the Sri Lanka Sustainable Energy Authority and supported by the FAO and UNDP provides island wide energy services and programmes to promote women’s skills development and employment.

Within the Modern Sustainable Biomass Energy Project many women explored cost effective methods to run their businesses. As a result, they and adopted innovative forms of biomass energy and availed themselves of modern technologies to improve their small enterprises and save energy costs.

Tangalle is an important hub for deep-sea fishing and has a thriving local dry fish industry. Unlike drying other consumables, the process of drying fish is long and time consuming, subject to environmental hazards, unhygienic conditions and prone to contamination. The work is mainly done by women who use the income to sustain their families. In 2016, through the assistance of the “Sustainable Biomass Energy” project, dryers were introduced in rural communities to help women improve and sustain their home-businesses and yield higher benefits.

For nine women the 40 KW flatbed dryer has vastly improved their production, productivity and incomes. Since 2016 they have reduced their working hours from ten to four hours a day and increased their production from 200 kgs to 800 kgs per month.

After two years of using this modern biomass dryer, the fish drying business has reached a new level in terms of quality of the final product and has contributed to increasing the living standards of the women working involved in the project.
During off-season, the dryer is used to dry chillies, pepper and cinnamon, ensuring women have a supplementary income throughout the year.

**Biomass technology enriches dairy products**

Yogurt has always been a popular dairy-based meal/snack amongst all age groups. In Sri Lanka, yogurt is consumed as a snack and dessert amongst children and adults. Yogurt contains lower amounts of lactose than milk because the lactose in yogurt is converted to lactic acid by the bacterial cultures.

Manthika Dilrukshi and her husband Chathura Munasinghe, started their yoghurt making business, RichMe Foods and Dairies in 2007.

For years, their biggest business expense was for power generation and the price they doled out for almost three gas cylinders per day for the heating process. “That was our biggest cost and we hardly made a profit after paying off these bills,” said Dilrukshi. In addition, there were times when the production had to be halted or discarded because of contaminants or uneven heating processes that ruined the entire production.

In 2016, the couple approached the Sustainable Biomass Energy project. Through a co-financing, they availed themselves of a 12KW Biomass Fired Water Heating system for Rs. 425,000. This heater can boil 230 liters of milk per month saving them around Rs. 60,000 per month. Sustainable fuelwood is sourced from a neighbourhood timber store. According to her, production has increased 100 percent- from 1500 batches of yogurt to 3000 per day. In addition, the temperature control allows them to perfectly manipulate the heat required to the exact second. The entire manufacturing process is clean, safe from fire hazards, hygienic and fast.

In conclusion, the Modern Sustainable Biomass Energy Project contributed to women’s economic empowerment through the introduction of a simple but effective technology. While access to energy services may not necessarily guarantee gender equality, it can go a long way in relieving women and girls of the drudgery associated with their daily tasks and providing them time for income-generating opportunities and education.

**Provide adequate data for SDG Indicators 5a1 and 5a2**

On 10-13 December 2018 FAO with the Asia office of the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics and the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific held a capacity development workshop on gender and land related data in Bangkok

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development brings gender equality into the mainstream of the development debate through its focus on leaving no one behind. Gender equality is featured both as a stand-alone goal – SDG5 – and as a crosscutting theme in all other SDGs.
We are excited to announce our new homepage for FAO’s gender work in Asia and the Pacific, broadcasting gender publications and useful resources from the region as our Country Gender Assessments, Newsletters or upcoming events. Please feel free to share with colleagues and counterparts and send us your inputs in case you want us to highlight events or other information from your offices!


Upcoming regional event

Asia-Pacific High-Level Preparatory Meeting for the sixty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 63)

The CSW63 will deliberate on the priority theme "Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls" from 11 to 22 March 2019 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. To assist the Commission, the Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for CSW 63 is being convened jointly by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, in collaboration with the Asia-Pacific UN Regional Coordination Mechanism Thematic Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (TWG-GEWE) at the UNCC in Bangkok, from 13 to 14 February 2019. The objective of the Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting is to provide an interactive forum for member States to examine the priority theme and develop policy recommendations, which will serve as the regional input to CSW63. The Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for CSW63 will bring together Ministers and high-level officials (from National Coordination Mechanism for gender equality and women's empowerment, Ministries of Social Development, Ministries of Public Health, Ministries of Finance or National Planning, Ministries of Infrastructure and entities responsible for social protection) in the Asia and Pacific region, as well as CSOs and UN Agencies

GENDER NEWS

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