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Mainstreaming gender for sustainable soil management

About this document

This document summarizes the online discussion *Mainstreaming gender for sustainable soil management*, held on the FAO Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum) from 23 September to 25 October 2019.

The discussion was facilitated by Ilaria Sisto and Ronald Vargas from FAO and aimed to collect views from a wide range of stakeholders about the relations between gender equality and sustainable soil management (SSM). Participants' contributions fed into the draft of the 'Guide on gender and sustainable soil management' prepared by the Regional Soil Partnerships, the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, and the Social Policies and Rural Institutions Division of FAO, with input from gender and soil management specialists.

Discussion participants shared their views on the relation between SSM and gender equality, and discussed the distinct roles women, men, boys and girls play in it. Furthermore, they identified some of the main gender-based constraints that hinder the uptake of SSM and contribute to soil degradation, and shared ideas on approaches that could help overcome such barriers. Participants also discussed actions aimed at promoting gender equality that need to be prioritized in the context of fostering SSM.

During the online discussion, participants from 28 countries shared 38 contributions. The topic introduction and the questions proposed, as well as all contributions received, are available on the discussion page: www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/discussions/soil-gender

Linking gender roles, gender equality and sustainable soil management

Discussion participants stressed that women play a substantial role in agriculture and that therefore, promoting gender equality is crucial for improving soil management. In general, participants agreed that there are strong linkages between sustainable soil use, management and conservation

on the one hand, and gender equality on the other; these links are related to economic, social, cultural, educational and political aspects (Oumou Kelthoum Niang, Mylene Rodríguez Leyton). However, the strength and character of these relationship(s) differ across contexts (Xavier Bouan).

This also emerged when participants from different countries discussed the distinct roles men and women play in agriculture and soil management activities:

- ▶ In **Europe**, workshops on SSM have attracted more men than women due to the fact that female farmers are in the minority. Consequently, women's ideas will not always be adequately represented during these activities, causing women to be less informed than men. However, during meetings on SSM organized in the context of the European SoilCare project the participation rate for women was higher than that for men. Furthermore, interviews carried out for European project RECARE suggested that women focused more on the future health of the soil, while men concentrated more on economic aspects ([Heleen Claringbould](#)).
- ▶ In eastern **India**, research suggested that women who used to carry food to the field for the men working there, gradually started to engage in farming activities. Over time, these women became more involved in decision-making ([Pabitra Paramanya](#)).
- ▶ In **Mauritania**, women and youth carry out the hard farm work and are directly involved in agricultural production and hence, in the exploitation of soil. Men, on the other hand, play a dominant role in decision-making on soil management issues ([Omou Kelthoum Niang](#)).



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- ▶ In some islands of **Micronesia** taro patches are owned and managed by women, who also look after aspects such as appropriate drainage and soil quality. Hence, women have a direct impact on sediment runoff, as the taro system naturally traps sediments. In other islands, where the cultural norm is that agroforestry is carried out by men, women manage home gardens and engage in active soil management by applying compost or seaweed to maintain or replenish soil nutrients ([Chiara Franco](#)).
- ▶ In **Nigeria**, roles of women and men seem to be different across the country. One of the participants pointed out that women, men and boys engage in farming activities, while girls carry out domestic chores ([Comfort Eze](#)). Another participant mentioned that women and girls are often tasked with planting, weeding and harvesting ([John Ede](#)).
- ▶ In **North Africa**, men work in the fields far from home and women play a predominant role in livestock activities, which are carried out at home or close to the village. Women also engage in fruit harvesting away from home but only when this is done in groups; the same applies to firewood gathering ([Abdesslam Omerani](#)).
- ▶ In **Peru**, women are the custodians of seeds and analyse soil conditions for cultivation. Often they also take care of fertilizing the land with animal manure, while they are also responsible for the supply of fertilizers by engaging in backyard breeding of animals – in this way, they contribute directly to soil health. Men are in charge of ploughing and other physically demanding activities related to crop growing. As part of their learning, boys and girls participate in all tasks carried out by their parents ([Pedro Rivera Cea](#)).
- ▶ In **South Asia**, rural women preserve cow dung for soil fertilization ([Altaf Hossain](#)).
- ▶ In **Sudan**, different patterns are visible: in the western part of the country, women carry out all the hard work on the farm, but do not own the land they cultivate. Men take farm-related decisions and are responsible for selling the produce. In the north and middle of the country the situation is different, as women are not allowed to engage in farm activities, which are carried out exclusively by men ([Sahar Babiker Ahmed Abdalla](#)).
- ▶ In **Zimbabwe**, rural women spend most of their time working on the farm while men, who mostly engage in jobs in towns, take the decisions related to land use and soil management ([Robert Mutisi](#)).

Gender-based constraints hindering sustainable soil management

While gender-based constraints that hinder the uptake of SSM practices differ across locations (Xavier Bouan), participants also discussed issues that exist worldwide. In fact, many issues are of a broader nature and embedded in the overall system, such as women's restricted access to education, paid jobs, finance, and real estate (Heleen Claringbould). A major problem is the fact that at policy level, units dedicated to addressing women's issues are lacking in relevant ministries, such as those of agriculture and fisheries, which has hampered efforts addressing gender inequality and discriminatory rules (Marcela Ballara). In addition to a lack of representation and capacity in the policy-making context, a general systemic issue concerns the preconception that women are not willing or able to run a farm; consequently, soil management misses the gender diversity that is needed for the adoption of a more sustainable approach (Heleen Claringbould).

Participants also identified more concrete gender-based constraints and differences that are directly related women's levels of engagement in agriculture and SSM activities:

- ▶ **Limited land rights** (Robert Mutisi, Heleen Claringbould, Comfort Eze). Land tenure is often less secure for women than for men (Katherine Loftis, Oumou Kelthoum Niang) with many women not owning the land they grow crops on. However, ownership would encourage investment in capital-intensive soil management practices that have long-term benefits (Lydia Wairegi).
- ▶ **Lower size and quality of land plots.** Women have often smaller landholdings, and the quality of the land they have access to tends to be lower as compared to that of men (Katherine Loftis).
- ▶ **Inadequate legal framework on the access and use of natural resources** (Oumou Kelthoum Niang). Women may not have the right to use communal land, which is restricted to men, who are the head of the household (Pedro Rivera Cea).

- ▶ **Exclusion from decision-making processes** (Altaf Hossain, Chiara Franco) on resource governance (Oumou Kelthoum Niang), land use and soil management (Robert Mutisi). Decisions are often made *for* women and not *by* women. Furthermore, if women are not at the table their ideas will not be represented (John Ede, Comfort Eze). At the village level, traditional forces sometimes hamper the democratization of debates (Oumou Kelthoum Niang) although women have also been excluded from relevant discussions at the global level (Comfort Eze).
- ▶ **Insufficient or inadequate capital to access production resources.** Available agricultural financing does often not respond to women's needs and expectations (Oumou Kelthoum Niang). Furthermore, women are likely to have lower income or other forms of capital than men. This may impact their ability to 1) invest in agricultural improvements; 2) access agricultural technologies, inputs, equipment and information, and 3) engage in longer-term land management activities (Katherine Loftis).



Women's active role in sustainable soil management in the Pacific

In the Pacific, women's groups and women-led NGOs are implementing projects and training on SSM and the reduction of soil erosion. They are leading transformational changes in soil management, in particular by targeting soil erosion and quality, in areas in the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau.

In Micronesia, for example, women's associations have promoted portable and normal dry litter piggeries, which has allowed for the production of local compost from pig waste: this reduces the threat animal waste poses to water resources while it enhances soil quality (Chiara Franco).

- ▶ **Lack of access to information, knowledge, inputs and services** (Rengalakshmi Raj). Men sometimes do not want women to learn about and implement agricultural innovations (Mary Odusegun) and social norms restrict women's interaction with male service providers (Rengalakshmi Raj); in fact, women may carry out all farm activities while men receive related services as they do own the land – services which they may not automatically make use of (Sahar Babiker Ahmed Abdalla). Sometimes, women's low participation in decision-making processes can also impair their ability to access training and information on appropriate methods for soil management (Chiara Franco).
- ▶ **Competing demands on labour.** Women often carry out a range of domestic duties that limit their time and ability to implement more time-consuming, labour-intensive agricultural practices (Katherine Lofts). Among the main gender-based constraints are those related to women's work burden (Pedro Rivera Cea).
- ▶ **Unfortunate timing of training and information events on soil management.** Women's access to these events is limited as the allocated time slots are often in conflict with their commitments to family and salaried jobs (Chiara Franco).
- ▶ **Differing knowledge of agriculture and land management.** Women and men may be responsible for different activities and for growing different types of crops, and thus have different knowledge (Katherine Lofts). In general, women tend to be less educated than men and are also less likely to attend agricultural training (Lydia Wairegi).
- ▶ **Limited practical experience in agriculture.** In some contexts, women do not work in the field (Ana Laura Jiménez): either they themselves refrain from doing so or it is not culturally accepted for women to engage in farming (Saud Al Farsi).

Approaches and solutions to overcome gender-based constraints

Participants shared practical ideas for approaches and initiatives that could help overcome gender-based constraints that hinder the adoption of SSM:

- ▶ Efforts to increase men's awareness of the importance gender equality in general should be strengthened (Mary Odusegun);
- ▶ Programs should strengthen and build on women's knowledge and raise awareness of the importance of SSM (Comfort Eze);
- ▶ Extension workers should pay specific attention to the needs of women in terms of information and agricultural inputs (Mary Odusegun, Sahar Babiker Ahmed Abdalla);
- ▶ Active platforms for knowledge exchange and management could be created to improve women's access to information and build their capacity in SSM (Chiara Franco) – for instance, digital platforms could be built (Heleen Claringbould);
- ▶ Workshops and training on SSM should be provided at a time that is suitable for women (Chiara Franco);
- ▶ Training on composting household waste and the production of other simple compost type fertilizers could be organized in order to promote fertilization of home gardens, which are often managed by women (Sahar Babiker Ahmed Abdalla, AAM Zowadul Karim Khan);
- ▶ Gender-specific workshops could be organized to create a space where women can voice their opinion – these can then be followed by joint workshops in which both women and men can share their ideas (Ana Laura Jiménez);
- ▶ Leaders of women's groups could be invited to discussions, consultations, and decision-making processes at the community level to ensure that women's views are taken into account (John Ede);
- ▶ Gender-based agricultural associations could be strengthened (Saud Al Farsi);
- ▶ Small- and medium-sized enterprises could cooperate on the implementation of gender projects (Saud Al Farsi);
- ▶ Support should be given to women in findings ways to sell their agricultural produce (Sahar Babiker Ahmed Abdalla).



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Promoting women's empowerment for sustainable soil management: actions to be prioritized

Fostering gender equality and women's empowerment is essential to the process of promoting SSM, as it addresses underlying resource and knowledge inequities between women and men that affect land tenure and soil management (Andrew Patterson). Furthermore, it will help ensure that women's role in agriculture is recognized (Pabitra Paramanya, Oumou Kelthoum Niang), which will, in turn, translate into the provision of the support they need to adopt SSM practices (Oumou Kelthoum Niang). At the same time, however, participants stressed that rather than empowering women more than men, promoting gender equality consists in bringing women and men to an equal level of knowledge, and in facilitating the sharing of knowledge and ideas between them (Ana Laura Jiménez). Indeed, men must be willing to work with women's ideas and soils must be managed according to collective decisions (Hamadoun A. Haidara), while both men and women take their responsibility and adopt a sustainable approach (Aklilu Nigussie, Ayşen Sema Tekin).

Promoting gender equality first of all requires the implementation of "women-friendly" rules and regulations (Md. Zahangir Hossain) and the revision of existing local and national regulatory frameworks to address gender inequality and acknowledge women's role in natural resource management (Pedro Rivera Cea). In this context, discrimination against women that limits their access to (agricultural) resources, education, extension, financial services and labour markets should be addressed (Comfort Eze). Gender should also be mainstreamed in land management frameworks, which should include gender equality as a definite goal, for which clear targets should be identified (Rahmi Khalida). Some comments also suggested to develop a general gender policy for the rural sector in order to integrate the needs of rural women in projects and activities (Marcela Ballara).

It was stressed that in any case, it is necessary to involve local people and in particular women in decision- and policy-making, i.e. to adopt a people-centred approach (John Ede). Another crucial aspect for designing appropriate interventions is to look at the intersectional identities of women and men, including class, ethnicity, age and status, and to understand how these play a role in people's (dis)empowerment (Marcela Ballara, Katherine Lofts). In fact, some comments stressed that before undertaking action, it first needs to be clear how many women are affected by gender inequality, and the severity of the issues they experience should be understood (Dick Tinsley). One of the participants even argued that before addressing gender-related issues, the fundamental problem of modern agriculture should be addressed: the fact that it

focuses on increasing productivity at the expense of natural resources and the environment (Paolo Groppo).

However, there was broad consensus on the fact that women's empowerment needs to be promoted in order to achieve SSM. Some comments highlighted that this should in general be done by developing women's agency, changing relations and transforming structures, and addressing systemic gender gaps in resources and capacities to sustainably manage soil (Andrew Patterson). Participants also shared more concrete aspects and interventions that need to be prioritized:

- ▶ Education and training on SSM should be improved (Lydia Wairegi) and specifically target women and girls (Katherine Lofts). Lessons on SSM should be included in school curricula (Amanullah) and online courses and mobile phone applications should be made available, which should include subjects that attract both women and men (Heleen Claringbould).
- ▶ Opportunities to learn from grandmothers, other elders, and indigenous women should be supported (Katherine Lofts).
- ▶ Technical support to women should be offered by female advisors, who may be sensitive to women's questions (Heleen Claringbould).

Monitoring the SDGs for women's empowerment in the context of sustainable soil management

Promoting rural women's empowerment requires a commitment to monitoring progress towards the achievement of the SDGs. In this regard, indicators 1.4.2 on secure tenure rights to land and indicator 5.a.2 on legal frameworks that guarantee women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control are particularly important. The data to be collected for this monitoring purpose should, when possible, be disaggregated by characteristics relevant to national contexts. In addition, carrying out intersectional analyses would help address issues related to gender and economic justice, as they reveal women's different identities and the particular issues they face. Taking these specificities into account is crucial in the process of designing policies and action plans (Marcela Ballara).

- ▶ Agricultural inputs, financial resources and incentives such as subsidies should be provided (Saud Al Farsi, Lydia Wairegi, Sahar Babiker Ahmed Abdalla, Dinesh Panday) to help women work on their ideas. For instance, gender quota could be applied when making loans or subsidies available for the implementation of SSM or conservation practices, or the establishment of an organic farm (Heleen Claringbould).
- ▶ Advocacy for more equal land tenure should be strengthened (Katherine Lofts).
- ▶ Investments should be made in labour-saving and productivity-enhancing technologies and infrastructure to free women's time for more productive activities (Comfort Eze).
- ▶ Inclusive and participatory multi-stakeholder platforms should be created at the local level to: 1) find mutually agreed solutions which can inform policymakers; 2) foster a culture of inclusive, peaceful and participatory dialogue between all stakeholders; 3) build trust among all actors (Oumou Kelthoum Niang).

Participants also discussed how farmers could be encouraged to invest in and apply SSM practices. As some comments pointed out, farmers who have always had an income by cultivating a single crop on the same plot of land may not be attentive to soil health or aware of the consequences of unsustainable soil management practices. In this regard, it is important to take into account that women are sometimes more sensitive to issues that could affect their family than men. It is likely that this also applies to soil management, and together with women's ability to make their partners aware of the importance of this issue, this could provide



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an opening for efforts aimed at promoting SSM. Women themselves could be taught SSM techniques that are directly related to everyday household tasks, such as using organic matter for soil fertilization (Ana Laura Jiménez).

Comments received also addressed the question of how and at which level initiatives to promote gender equality should be implemented. Some comments stressed that this should be done at the community level to get buy-in and support from all stakeholders (Lydia Wairegi). Furthermore, the example of FAO's approach in Chile was shared, which focused on supporting public policy making in the agricultural sector, targeting rural women in particular. In this context, the Working Group on Rural Women (*Mesa de Trabajo Mujer Rural*) served as a forum for dialogue and coordination between governments and women's organizations at the regional and national level. Such an approach could contribute to interventions that promote gender equality and change discriminatory rules that affect SSM (Marcela Ballara).

CARE's approaches linking gender equality and sustainable agriculture and food systems

CARE's "She Feeds the World" programmatic framework aims to improve access to information, resources and assets for women working in the agricultural sector. The framework includes a specific focus on improving women's access to land, which involves the organization of gender and community dialogues on access to land, advocacy to influence policy on access and utilization of land for women, and innovative approaches to land titling. Other elements that are key to CARE's strategy are climate-resilient agriculture technologies and landscape approaches for natural resource management and risk reduction.

Another example is CARE's gender-sensitive approach to Farmer's Field Business Schools (FFBS), which has transformed the status and recognition of women. Evidence shows that participation in FFBS: 1) builds women's self-confidence and autonomy; 2) reduces gender-based violence, and 3) engenders respect from their families and communities (Andrew Patterson). The FFBS model has empowered female farmers and at the same time promoted the adoption of climate-smart agriculture because it gives risk-averse farmers a low-risk environment in which to experiment (Colleen Farrell).

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Agricultural Development Economics Division (ESA)
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
www.fao.org/fsnforum ► fsn-moderator@fao.org



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