In spite of the significant contributions women make to household food security and economic and agricultural development, in many countries women’s access to services and resources are not equal to that of their male counterparts. Rural women rarely own the land they farm and are often legally barred from owning property. Without land to serve as collateral, women are not granted the credit they need to buy tools, seeds and fertilizer. Scarce time, little ready cash and poorly adapted meeting schedules often hinder women’s participation and membership in local cooperatives and farmers’ organizations or their involvement in agricultural training programmes.

FAO advocates gender equality and promotes the economic and social empowerment of rural women. By actively focusing attention on the discrimination rural women face daily, FAO supports government efforts to ensure that their policies and programmes promote and support women as equal contributors to agriculture and rural development.

FAO’s approach to gender equality

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Rural women’s invisible role in agriculture

Despite considerable progress in adding a gender dimension to agricultural statistics, the true contribution of women to agricultural economic production and their role in household food security are often underestimated. Rural women’s work in the agricultural sector is somewhat invisible because their activities and products are often related to their role as caretakers rather than for the market economy.

FAO’s projections through 2010 indicate that of the percentage of economically active women in least developed countries, more than 70 percent work in agriculture.

To increase the effectiveness of agricultural development strategies it is important to recognize the differing roles, needs and priorities of men and women. Such recognition is crucial to understanding the different inequalities they face and to ensuring that these are reflected in agricultural and rural statistics.
For 60 years FAO’s gender programme has assisted member countries to address gender issues in agricultural (including fisheries and forestry) policies. A core element of the programme is capacity building. By providing training and training materials/guidelines, technical support and policy and technical advice, the programme broadens the knowledge and skills of staff, partners and member countries on the gender dimensions of food security and poverty.

The programme has:
- trained more than 4,000 development specialists working at the field, institutional and policy levels in more than 100 countries;
- assisted more than 30 countries to develop national action plans for the agricultural and rural development sectors that take into consideration gender issues;
- provided technical support for drafting gender-sensitive guidelines for the World Programme for the Census of Agriculture 2000 and 2010;
- provided technical support to more than 40 countries to develop gender-sensitive agricultural statistics, and assisted more than 10 countries to retabulate data sets to incorporate gender in their agricultural censuses;
- contributed to building the capacity of development specialists to formulate gender-sensitive policy and to collect and retabulate sex-disaggregated data;
- conducted gender-sensitive communication campaigns addressing issues of food security, property rights and HIV and AIDS.

FAO has strengthened its programme to be in line with the United Nations system-wide policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women. It has also adopted measures to improve support to its staff and member countries to integrate the concerns of women and men into development strategies.

FAO’s fourth Gender and Development Plan of Action, covering the period 2008–2013, outlines the Organization’s gender strategy in the areas of food and nutrition, natural resources, rural economies, labour and livelihoods, and agricultural and rural development policy planning. The plan also takes into consideration the gender aspects of current global concerns and other key issues related to food security such as agro-biodiversity, emergency operations and rehabilitation, changing food prices, climate change and bioenergy, diseases (human, animal and plant) and globalization (trade and changing institutions).

For more than two decades FAO has been working with member countries to encourage national statistical programmes to incorporate gender and population factors into agricultural censuses and surveys. FAO is producing a statistical toolkit for the production of sex-disaggregated agricultural data, which are based on these experiences.

Sex-disaggregated data to increase rural women’s visibility

Rural women’s productive activities and those related to childcare, food preparation, household maintenance, etc. are often hidden, dispersed and informally or inadequately accounted for in national statistics. A powerful way to combat the persistent invisibility of their work is to generate sex-disaggregated agricultural data. The lack of these data is a serious barrier to formulating, designing and implementing effective policies and programmes that consider both rural men’s and women’s needs and priorities in agriculture and rural development strategies.

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