



# Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition

FSN Forum

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## Rural women: striving for gender-transformative impacts

### About this online discussion

In March 2018, at the 62nd Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), once again the spotlight will be focused on addressing the specific challenges and opportunities faced by rural women and girls. As part of the preparations for CSW, FAO – together with IFAD, UN Women and WFP – ran an online discussion from 17 July to 6 August 2017 to explore the critical gaps and highlight priority areas for action on how to accelerate gender-transformative impacts for rural women and girls.

This paper presents a summary of the 98 contributions received from 78 people (25 percent men), representing over 30 countries and a variety of organizations, multilateral and bilateral agencies, NGOs, research institutes and academia. The discussion focused on three principal questions, which are addressed below: What are the main challenges rural women and girls are facing today? Are we using the right approaches and policies to close the gender gap? How can we best achieve gender-transformative impacts?

The online discussion was facilitated by Clare Bishop (FAO consultant) with technical support from Regina Laub (FAO ESP); this summary was prepared by the FSN Forum Team in collaboration with Clare Bishop, Regina Laub and Ilaria Sisto (ESP).

### Introduction

Throughout the world, gender is a fundamental factor in the organization of societies, in particular regarding the division of labour and access to commercial activity for men and women (Kouakou Valentin Kra). Striving for gender equality is therefore an important prerequisite for viable and sustainable development – especially in rural areas and agriculture (Yannick de Mol) – that leaves no one behind. This is further underlined by the fact that a significant relationship exists between women's empowerment and food security (Yanfeng Huang). But gender equality is not just about economic empowerment; it is also a moral imperative with many

political, social and cultural dimensions, as rural women and girls also face the additional threat of being subject to gender-based violence within the home and outside (Subhalakshmi Nandi, Santosh Kumar Mishra). Almost everywhere, women face more severe constraints than men in accessing productive resources, markets and services (Muhammad Raza). The provision of equal entitlements is hence central to protecting their rights, helping them overcome the disadvantages they face (Nitya Rao), and recognizing their potential as agents of change for their households and communities.

The rules and customs governing the role of women in a given society reflect political power structures that are learned, or embodied, from a young age through family power relations (Santosh Kumar Mishra). If all those with a stake in changing gender roles, including women and men, are brought together by their traditional community leaders to discuss how all might benefit from gender equality, there is a chance that

policy can be implemented that has relevance to the well-being of people and their communities (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning). Achieving gender equality is thus an essential condition for achieving food security and nutrition, and for meeting all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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## Setting the scene

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Both food systems and the agriculture sector are experiencing rapid and intense transformation, requiring them to feed a growing population in the context of emerging economic, environmental and social upheavals. The impact of climate change and the depletion of natural resources are jeopardizing agricultural production and livelihoods, and also generating or exacerbating other global challenges such as price volatility and market insecurity, conflicts and protracted crises,

and mass migration. Addressing these complex challenges requires integrated and context-related solutions in a broad, transformative process centred on the efforts of both women and men. More sustained efforts are needed to invest in the abilities of women and girls and to create an enabling environment for them to equally participate in and benefit from the changes in rural settings and livelihoods.

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## Feminization of agriculture

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Many developing countries are seeing increased feminization of agriculture as a result of increased urbanization, the migration of many young men to the cities, commercial farming growth, conflict, and climate change. Unfortunately, in many rural settings, women's growing labour force participation does not necessarily translate into an improvement in their employment status relative to men, or in their well-being (Marcela Ballara, Libor Stloukal); rather, it often results in an increase in their work burden and time poverty (Szilvia Lehel). In the rice farming systems in the Philippines, however, male out-migration has not necessarily increased women's workloads, because they have used the remittances to hire labour; still, they encounter difficulties accessing key inputs and extension services.

In contrast, when women migrate, the men left behind often find it difficult to cover the domestic tasks and care work (Jeanette Cooke).

The feminization of rural areas can lead to women being recognized as temporary heads of household and to a redistribution of the productive and reproductive tasks within the household and the community. But this can also be accompanied by increased negative public scrutiny of women's behaviour and roles (as seen for instance in Nepal). While attention is focused on ensuring safe migration and the productive use of remittances, more needs to be done to support women in their new role (Kala Koyu).

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## Demographic transition

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Discussion participants also noted the profound demographic transition that societies go through when modernizing, as seen in the significant declines in fertility. This declining fertility tends to lessen the conflict between domestic and non-domestic responsibilities, such that women become better able to access educational and employment opportunities outside the domestic sphere.

The transition, however, may also bring the expectation for women to not only carry out day-to-day household tasks but also to find a formal occupation outside the household. The importance of the socio-economic impact of such transition – such as the loss of status associated with motherhood – needs to be acknowledged and supported by appropriate policies (Libor Stloukal).

## Climate change, conflict and crises

Climate change, conflict and crises play a significant role in the lives of rural women and girls. The uncertainty that climate change generates for rural livelihoods and the threat it poses in the form of increased intensity and frequency of natural hazards adds further hardship to the lives of many rural women and girls. In many contexts, women farmers are more exposed to climate risks compared with men, as they depend more on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihood (Szilvia Lehel). They have fewer endowments and entitlements to help them absorb shocks, and as a consequence may adopt risky strategies such as illegal activities or transactional sex in order to survive (Nitya Rao). To make matters worse, interventions often fail to accurately understand the role of women and girls, and therefore do not fully integrate them into resilience and peace-building processes (Elizabeth Koechlein). For example, women are often excluded from training programmes on new sustainable technologies and agricultural practices, making it difficult for them to adopt mitigation measures (Anke Stock).

However, women can be empowered by their role in climate change adaptation and mitigation if they are provided with equal opportunities and equitable access to productive assets, markets, climate information, services information, technology and training.

To support women and to create the required enabling environment, it is necessary to design appropriate policy frameworks. While these are most certainly challenging to implement, a strong business case exists for investing in women to build their climate resilience. Findings from Bolivia and Mexico show that female farmers possess knowledge about different plant varieties and when to plant which crop, thereby improving household resilience to the effects of climate change (Szilvia Lehel).

### Question 1: What are the main challenges rural women and girls are facing today?

#### Social norms limit women's agency

Challenges to the empowerment of women and girls living in rural settings cannot be generalized, either across regions or within countries (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning). However, the participants agreed that for many women, the biggest barrier they face is the societal belief of what they should be and how they should be allowed to behave (Emily Janoch). Societal norms sometimes present large hurdles in achieving transformative impacts (Mahesh Chander). Too often rural women lack voice and representation in government, unions, farmer cooperatives and decision-making bodies in general, as religious and societal norms prevent them from being seen as equals (Amanullah, Kala Koyu, Sudharani N.). For many rural women and girls, their lives remain virtually unchanged over the decades; often their definition of success lies in their ability to marry and have children (Muthoni Nguthi).

#### Lack of education

Girls' education is essential for the empowerment of the next generation of women. However, girls tend to drop out of school earlier, especially in countries where early marriages are very common. They are often unable to go to school at all, as the little money that families have is used for the boys, while the girls are kept busy with household chores (Jyoti Shrivastava, Byansi Hamidu). Overall, women

have limited access to education, training and mentoring (Mahesh Chander). This has a profound impact not only on girls' basic literacy and numeracy skills but also on their self-esteem, self-confidence and dreams for their future.

#### Lack of legal and financial entitlement

Lack of property rights for women and girls, coupled with the patrilineal system of land inheritance operating in many developing regions, means that they do not have direct access to land and other natural resources except through their husbands and male relatives. Since access to credit



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and capital assets are tied to the possession of land and to property rights, women often have difficulty obtaining credit or acquiring the capital needed to hire additional labour or invest in time-saving farm innovations (Takele Teshome, Margot Tapia, Taibat Moji Yusuf).

Financial institutions also perpetuate discrimination against women: many banks consider them to be a higher risk because they do not trust women's entrepreneurial ability. Banks do not have financial products tailored to rural women, and usually require their clients to be literate and demand loan collateral – which women often cannot provide due to the absence of legal entitlements (Taibat Moji Yusuf).

Studies also confirm that even where legal equality is foreseen by the law, women do not automatically enjoy equality. The OECD's 2014 Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) found that out of 102 countries exhibiting discrimination, only 7 had legal discrimination, while the remaining 94 granted women and men the same legal rights to access land, but with customary, traditional and religious practices that still curtailed women's rights (Annelise Thim). For example, even in countries where female genital mutilation has been criminalized, the practice still abounds (Muthoni Nguthi).

### The burden of unpaid and care work

Another root cause of gender inequality and a major obstacle to women's empowerment in both rural and urban areas is the huge burden of unpaid care work borne by women and girls. Together with agricultural work and domestic chores, it leaves very little room for education, paid work or starting small businesses (Hazel Bedford, Sosan Aziz, Sidra Mazhar, Flavia Grassi, Johanna Schmidt, Khadidja Nene Doucoure, Anke Stock). This is further complicated by the difficulty women and girls face in accessing labour-saving technologies (Taibat Moji Yusuf, Flavia Grassi, Johanna Schmidt).

In addition, the trade-off between agricultural work and child care can also contribute to the persistence of nutritional deprivation across generations (Nitya Rao).

### Difficulty in accessing the labour market

In many societies, women and girls play an important role in generating family income by providing labour for planting, weeding, harvesting and threshing crops, and processing produce for sale; this labour is unpaid, and goes largely unnoticed (Mahesh Chander, Taibat Moji Yusuf). Being associated with these kinds of activities makes access to more formal work (both on- and off-farm) difficult.

It does not help that entrepreneurship programmes mainly focus on men, while women find themselves engaged in menial jobs that lack the potential for entrepreneurship (Mahesh Chander).

Women may face challenges in becoming successful commercial producers as they often lack mobility to access more distant markets, are less aware of prices and standards, and may be prevented from constructively interacting with male market intermediaries (Rieky Stuart).

For example, among coffee producers in Kenya, managing the crop is seen as a male prerogative with women only providing labour for production activities. As men are the shareholders of the cooperative and the ones who own bank accounts, payments go directly to them (Peter Mbuchi).

Also, in societies affected by high unemployment, women are oftentimes ignored as potential members of the workforce. This can be aggravated when social and religious norms limit women's freedom of movement and decision-making, in which case accepting them into the labour force might even be impractical (Amanullah).

This difficulty in accessing the labour market is further aggravated by the fact that rural women often lack education and marketable skills (Bertha Yiberla Yenwo). In Nepal, rural society rarely permits younger women to openly communicate with male extension workers or to go to market independently. They are also not allowed to make independent choices regarding inputs and services or accessing the market, or to participate in training and exposure visits (Kanchan Lama).

### A testimonial from girls at a rural school in India

"In one interaction with children in a rural school we asked the girls what they do when they go home. They replied by describing different household tasks like sweeping, fetching water, helping with cooking, etc. When asked what their brothers do, the replies were: they go out and play, watch television, study, etc. When asked why the brothers can't help with household tasks, there were surprised and blank looks. With this discussion we tried to get them thinking about unequal gender roles. One teacher was unhappy with us for putting ideas in the minds of girls who are perfectly happy doing what they are doing – especially since now they even go to school" (Mahtab S. Bamji).

## Question 2: Are we using the right approaches and policies to close the gender gap?

### There is progress, but more needs to be done

The battle for policy and institutional reform is gradually being won. With the exception of some countries failing to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), many countries have made considerable efforts to influence policy that furthers gender equality (Muthoni Nguthi). However, projects with the ability to transform negative gender roles and empower rural women and girls remain a very small part of rural and agricultural development aid. In 2015, over USD 3 billion of ODA committed to rural and agriculture projects targeted gender equality and women's empowerment; however, only around 5 percent of this aid (approximately USD 187 million) targeted gender equality as a principle objective. Harnessing this aid and improving the work already being done, through application of a social norm lens to the design and implementation process, is one way to strengthen the benefits for rural women and girls (Annelise Thim).

### Context specificity

Programmes and projects are still sometimes formulated based on a general needs assessment and do not include proper gender analysis (Takele Teshome). Given that gender is a highly complex and sensitive social construct, affected by customs and rights that have developed over centuries, there is a great need for gender specialists, social scientists, researchers, communication specialists and knowledge brokers to work closely together in order to develop a gender-responsive strategic approach for policy-makers (Sangeetha Rajeesh). Moreover, rural women are a very heterogeneous group, differing by age, wealth, social status, marital status and system, education, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, livelihood and location (Jipara Turmammatova, Subhalakshmi Nandi, Emile Hougbo).

Approaches need to be highly context-specific (Amanullah, Anne Chele, Emile Hougbo, Nitya Rao). Yet, participants felt that development actors tend to rely on excessively broad and sometimes outdated assumptions about gender issues in the planning and design of interventions aiming to empower rural women. There is no question that global data on the constraints faced by rural women are of great importance, and that the sharing of documented good practices to address these challenges can be helpful to inform project design. However, these should not be seen as replacements for context-specific analysis and participatory approaches.

Efforts to empower women often miss the mark because of blanket assumptions about their needs and preferences (Sofie Isenberg). Questions posed to understand the needs and priorities of rural women and girls must be relevant, and there should be sufficient time spent listening to and understanding the various responses (Elizabeth Koechlein). Collaborating with grassroots women's groups can help improve the understanding of the specific context (Cathy Holt). There is also room for strengthening efforts to better understand what constitutes empowerment from the women's perspective. The safe/empowering spaces that women currently have in their lives can represent natural entry points for gender-transformative action (Judith D'Souza).

### Women-only empowerment can be a risky strategy

Focusing only on women's empowerment can be risky, as both the beneficiaries and the society at large can perceive this as an artificial development, purely grounded in external interventions. Women's confidence may not be developed sustainably and, as men still retain most of the power in society, any positive effects can be easily reversed. Changing norms, power relations and social institutions is only achievable when people define the change process themselves; moreover, empowering measures are most effective when both women and men are equipped to make decisions on the changes they are willing to see (Leocadia Muzah, Anja Rabezanahary). Nevertheless, it is sometimes necessary to have women-targeted interventions to close existing gender gaps so that women benefit appropriately from the opportunities generated by a particular project (Atika Marouf). Indeed, when it comes to finding the most suitable entry point for gender-transformative actions, traditional social structures can at times be an advantage rather than a hindrance (John Weatherhogg). For example, under a project funded by the World Bank, women's groups in Punjab/Haryana/Himachal Pradesh were initially created with the task of collecting money to maintain drinking water systems, but then evolved into informal savings and loan societies.

Drafting policies without first addressing the social roots of gender inequalities risks increasing resentment between the sexes (Muthoni Nguthi). In Zambia for example, the pass marks at school for girls are lower than those of boys. While this could be seen as affirmative action, it also perpetuates the assumption that girls are less intelligent than boys. Such subtle narratives risk reinforcing the notion that the abilities of women and girls are not as great (Kennedy Phiri).

## Cross-cutting approaches

Policy discussions on gender issues often remain within the boundaries of social policies and are deprioritized in sectoral policies. This concerns macroeconomic policies especially, which have important gender implications but are often treated as gender-neutral by policy-makers. The inclusion of the gender dimension in macroeconomic discussions, including fiscal policies, priorities for government spending, and monetary and trade policies, is essential to achieving sustainable change (Jipara Turmamatova). Indeed the consistent mainstreaming of gender into other sectors leads to more effective policies for the whole society (Anke Stock).

## Tokenism versus substance

There are numerous examples of agricultural development programmes in which the major investments – for example, large irrigation schemes – are directed at men or male-dominated farmers' organizations, leaving only small-scale kitchen gardens for individual women or women's groups (Juliane Friedrich). This is a significant missed opportunity to engage with women as development actors rather than reinforcing the stereotypical roles of women as home providers and men engaged in "real" business. Nevertheless, in some contexts, increasing women's knowledge about home gardens was observed to improve their status in the community (Kuruppacharil V. Peter).

## Measuring empowerment

One challenge of gender equality is finding a robust means of measuring outcomes of projects, approaches and policies to better understand what works and how to improve design and implementation (Maria Lee). The use of a detailed accountability framework on gender transformation with SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely) indicators is necessary (Juliane Friedrich). However, qualitative changes in gender relations, roles and positions in households and societies occur over a period of time, well beyond the normal time frame of a project. This makes it

challenging to assess the success and measure the general impacts of any gender-sensitive intervention (Khadidja Nene Doucoure). Both the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) developed by IFPRI, USAID and OPHI (Yanfang Huang) and the OECD's SIGI (Annelise Thim) have been shown to provide useful insights into levels of inequality and opportunities for empowerment. The SIGI finds that lower levels of discrimination against women are linked to better outcomes in several areas, including educational attainment, child health and food security (Muthoni Nguthi). Use of the WEAI in Inner Mongolia found that the main factor contributing to women's disempowerment was the lack of control over agricultural production decisions, productive resources and credit (Yanfang Huang). In addition, Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN) has developed the W+ Standard as a certification scheme to incentivize project developers and investors to invest in women and contribute to SDG 5 and other SDGs where women play a critical role (Maria Lee).

### WOCAN's W+ Standard

WOCAN developed the W+ Standard to measure progress in women's empowerment in six areas: Time, Income and Assets, Health, Leadership, Education and Knowledge, and Food Security. Verified by an independent auditor, the progress measurements identify the social and economic values – called "W+ women-benefit units" – that exist for women. These units can be bought by individuals, companies and investors to create a meaningful and measurable positive impact. A share of the sale of the units goes to women and women's groups. Putting money directly into women's hands has proven to be transformative for their lives, as they are more likely than men to reinvest it to meet the needs of their families and communities (Maria Lee).

## Question 3: How can we best achieve gender-transformative impacts?

### Acting within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

In terms of transformative change, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can have an enormous impact on rural women's empowerment and in achieving gender equality. For example, the programme Women 2030 enacted by Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF) in cooperation with worldwide partners provides gender-responsive strategies for achieving the SDGs, promoting gender mainstreaming at

all levels, and focusing on SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 13 (mitigating climate change). Indeed, progress on gender equality is one of the preconditions to meeting any of the SDGs (Anke Stock, Muthoni Nguthi).

### Designing gender-equitable agricultural policies

Agricultural policies can play a strong role in closing the gender gap in rural societies, thus strengthening women's access to productive resources, rural services, infrastructure,

advisory services, economic opportunities and social protection. Other affirmative actions include providing vulnerable rural women with subsidized land, seeds and training (Libor Stloukal, Kanchan Lama).

To ensure that agricultural policies tackle the gender aspect more explicitly, the following actions are necessary:

- ▶ Sensitize agricultural policy-makers to the needs and capacities of rural women as economic actors.
- ▶ Analyse existing agricultural policies from a gender perspective.
- ▶ Collect up-to-date data on the realities faced by rural women and men in order to inform policy development.
- ▶ Collect sex-disaggregated labour and time-use data to make women's contributions visible and promote evidence-based policy formulation (Sidra Mazhar, Margot Tapia, Flavia Grassi, Johanna Schmidt, Jipara Turmamatova).
- ▶ Enhance the participation of rural women in agriculture-related policy-planning processes.
- ▶ Promote policy dialogue among various stakeholders with adequate participation of women.
- ▶ Collect and disseminate good practices in gender-sensitive policy-making.
- ▶ Ensure legal frameworks grant and protect the rights of women (for example, land tenure and inheritance), and that women are educated on their rights and entitlements.
- ▶ Ensure good governance mechanisms for proper policy implementation.
- ▶ Value unpaid care and domestic work, and ensure it is reflected in national statistics.
- ▶ Introduce gender-sensitive budgeting.

## Gender in Agricultural Policies Analysis Tool (GAPo)

The FAO Gender in Agricultural Policies Analysis Tool aims to provide policy-makers with practical and evidence-based guidance for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in agricultural policies, with a view to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It allows stakeholders involved in policy formulation processes to analyse and assess the gender equality gaps in national agricultural policies and identify concrete solutions to address those gaps (Libor Stloukal).

## Policy engagement

Formal dialogue platforms that bring together representatives from women's organizations with local and regional/national governments not only increase women's participation in the political sphere but also ensure that gender-responsive strategies are used when drafting new legislative measures (Anke Stock). For example, the Forum for the Rights of Women Farmers (MAKAAM) in India is an advocacy alliance that addresses the persistent poverty and vulnerability of women farmers and rural women (Subhalakshmi Nandi). In Chile, the Rural Women's Dialogue Table was established to advocate for the integration of women in economic activity and for decent employment (Marcela Ballara). Under the UN Joint Programme for the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women in Kyrgyzstan, as a result of their increased engagement in community life, women successfully lobbied for the endorsement of gender-sensitive local development plans in 15 rural districts for the period 2017–2030. These field-level successes have gone on to inform the design of national gender-sensitive policies as part of the country's sustainable development framework (Jipara Turmamatova).

## Creating a gender-inclusive legal system

The explicit legal recognition of women as farmers with equal entitlements is a precondition to removing inequalities in their access to resources and services (Nitya Rao, Tania Sharmin, Taibat Moji Yusuf, Siyanbola Omitoyin, Morgane Danielou). Land tenure for instance is crucial for women's livelihood security, which underscores the need for legal frameworks that grant and protect their tenure rights. Security of tenure gives women the incentive, security and opportunity to invest in the land they cultivate and harvest (Mahesh Chander, Szilvia Lehel). To be effective, this needs to be addressed in conjunction with other laws that affect women, such as those concerning marriage and inheritance, common property and water resources (Subhalakshmi Nandi). In addition, women must also receive education and guidance about their tenure rights (Cathy Holt, Sidra Mazhar). As an affirmative action, local government authorities could also support landless rural women by distributing land among women who are already organized in cooperatives (Taibat Moji Yusuf).

## Tackling the social dimension

One characteristic of women's economic empowerment is their increased presence in decision-making bodies, both numerically and also in terms of the quality of their contributions. This requires investment in capacity development to build women's confidence and negotiation skills so they are able and willing to engage in and contribute to discussions in male-dominated forums (Anne Chele, Santosh Kumar Mishra).

Gender norms can be challenged by encouraging inclusive community dialogue and the redistribution of the work burden at the household level (Flavia Grassi, Johanna Schmidt). Initiatives like the FAO Dimitra Clubs help foster such dialogue. These are informal groups of women, men and youth – both mixed and single-sex – that meet regularly to discuss the problems they face in their daily lives, both among themselves and with other clubs. This allows them to make informed choices and take collective action to solve these problems using their own resources, and also strengthens the relationships between women and men (Andrea Sánchez Enciso, Yannick de Mol, Halimatou Moussa). The inclusiveness of this process helps strengthen social cohesion rather than increase tensions in the communities (Sofie Isenberg). It also enables women (and men) to improve their self-esteem, emerge as leaders and participate in community life (Mauro Bottaro).

Capacity building of youth-led, community-based organizations allows for the development of sustainable approaches to understanding and addressing critical issues in the community, including gender inequalities (Abdul-Aziz Seidu Jawula, Taibat Moji Yusuf). In Nepal, role-playing proved an effective mechanism for raising men's awareness of the work burden of women, as well as the care and nutritional needs of household members, which resulted in men being more willing to share household responsibilities (Alok Shrestha). In Bangladesh, engaging husbands and wives in gender dialogue sessions and using daily time-use tools resulted in women enjoying 1–2 hours more leisure time per day; what's more, with their role as farmers acknowledged, they also felt confident enough to contact extension workers (Tania Sharmin). In Ethiopia, community dialogue facilitated discussion among women's groups on matters affecting their lives. In the Sudan, social behaviour change communication is being supported through community volunteers working in nutrition centres and home visits, as well as awareness



raising with community leaders and local authorities (Huda Abouh). The Huairou Commission supports grassroots women's groups in sharing their creative solutions through peer-to-peer exchanges (Cathy Holt). A harvest festival in Armenia encourages all family members to support women in their preparations, prompting boys as well as girls to help their mothers, thereby overcoming the traditional division of labour (Astghik Sahakyan). Governments can support such changes by acknowledging women as knowledgeable farmers in their own right (Takele Teshome, Kanchan Lama). In addition, women's leadership and expertise needs to be recognized in national legal settings (Morgane Danielou). In Liberia for instance, the Foundation for Community Initiatives (FCI) has found that bottom-up, grassroots approaches are more effective if rural women get involved in the process by collaborating with traditional leaders (usually men), headpersons and chiefs to transform customary practices (Taylor Tondelli).

The focus should be placed on women as farmers – i.e. individuals or members of collectives such as cooperatives, producer companies and unions – rather than “family farmers” (Subhalakshmi Nandi). In India, through the support of government funding schemes as well as the availability of credit, micro-agribusinesses helped raise the profile of women from housewife or house labourer to entrepreneur (Dineshkumar Singh). Access to finance earned the women respect from their family, boosted their confidence and contributed to livelihood security. In particular, the small loans from Grameen Bank have proven transformative. Poor women borrowers attend weekly meetings where they can make payments, get support for their small businesses and learn how to speak up for themselves. They agree to abide by Grameen's “Sixteen Decisions” that include making dramatic lifestyle changes such as building a latrine, growing more vegetables, keeping their families small and sending their children to school. While these are challenging goals for many women to accomplish completely, they provide a pathway to a better life (Mahesh Chander).

### Working with both men and women

The term “gender” is often mistakenly understood to mean only women. However, to bring about the needed gender transformation, it is necessary to work with men and women alike. Indeed, both men and women need to understand the value of changing the engrained social rules before any form of positive transformation can take place (Peter Mbuchi, Kala Koyu, Ekaterine Gurgenzidze, Sidra Mazhar, Yannick de Mol, Tania Sharmin, Amon Chinyophiro, Judith D'Souza). Using approaches that empower all members of a household can promote gender-transformative impacts by building on the strengths of individuals (rather than devaluing each other) for the sustainable well-being of all (Rwendeire Peniel, Emile Hougbo). Indeed a study in Malawi found that women's



empowerment can lead to increased household income per capita, but that collective action leads to even larger increases in household income and consumption per capita (Nancy McCarthy). There is a growing body of approaches which are proving effective, as seen in the box below (Peter Mbuchi, Hazel Bedford, Jipara Turmamatova, Cathy Farnworth, Anja Rabezanahary, Amon Chinyophiro).

It was argued that striving for women's empowerment by focusing on their autonomy in decision-making – based on the assumption that strengthening their voice will improve their bargaining power in intrahousehold decision-making – might be misleading. Data collected in Nepal for instance suggests that the strongest female innovators are those who

have secured the support of their extended family, working within and not necessarily against the established social norms (Cathy Farnworth, Sangeetha Rajeesh). Similarly in the United Republic of Tanzania, women who have moved forward and become successful have done so with the support of their husbands who are already progressive (Byansi Hamidu). In contrast, single women without extended family support networks are not able to benefit from the material resources associated with these, and thus find it harder to maintain innovatory practices (Cathy Farnworth).

Learning from current approaches and gathering more evidence from research could help create a stronger case for an integrated family approach and change how projects and policies address women – both as individuals and as family members (Nancy McCarthy).

## Gender Action Learning for Sustainability at Scale

Gender Action Learning for Sustainability at Scale (GALS) is a community-led empowerment methodology that can be adapted to different cultural and organizational contexts including communities without formal organizations, cooperatives of varying sizes, private commercial companies, NGOs and donor agencies. It can be adapted to tackle diverse issues including: livelihoods, food security, financial services, value chain development, conflict resolution, governance, health, reproductive rights and climate change.

GALS develops participatory visualization and planning skills and strengthens social networks for women and men at all levels, based on the generic Participatory Action Learning System (PALS) methodology. GALS focuses specifically on developing new visions for relationships between women and men as equal human beings, and on implementing changes in gender inequalities in resources and power. GALS is also mainstreamed in organizations and with multiple stakeholders to increase the effectiveness of development processes.

Through the development of self-motivated structures for peer-to-peer sharing and integration into the existing activities of public or private agencies, GALS can empower thousands of people to improve their lives and communities at relatively low cost (Anja Rabezanahary). Evidence from GALS households in Malawi found a significant shift towards sharing of on-farm and household tasks with the joint realization of benefits from agricultural produce, along with greater financial transparency and intrahousehold agreement on expenditures than non-GALS households (Cathy Farnworth).

## Creating trust between men and women

CARE Ethiopia, and the GRAD project (funded through USAID's Feed the Future), use **Social Analysis and Action (SAA)**, a technique for engaging with men and strengthening women's well-being in the community. SAA fosters community dialogue on social norms, and provides safe spaces for both men and women to discuss challenges and come up with solutions.

The subtle signs of more equitable relationships – such as men and women eating together or calling each other by name – are rewarding and can be self-reinforcing, leading to ever greater communication, understanding and trust in the relationship. For programmes that aim to shift gender dynamics, putting more energy and focus on relationship behaviours such as these (rather than, say, insisting that men begin to take on previously taboo tasks) could lead to a more profound process of renegotiation of power dynamics in the household (Emily Janoch).

## Engaging with men

When men are equally engaged in addressing gender inequalities as women, they can use their more influential position to help speed up the process of closing the gender gap. Women may become empowered but men will often try to hold them back unless they fully understand what gender equality is about and how it can benefit everyone (Leocadia Muzah). The world needs men who can see and understand existing gender gaps and effectively influence fellow men to change (Amon Chinyophiro). The hearts of men must embrace the value of gender equality (Muthoni Nguthi).

## Investing in education

To achieve gender parity a change in mindset is of crucial importance. The education of young rural girls and boys can strongly accelerate this change. For the change to be organic, education should include the subject of gender equality right from primary school. However, it is not enough for girls and women to simply access education; that education must also be inclusive, equitable and of good quality. Importantly, curricular content and the pedagogical approaches used in formal and non-formal educational settings should not reproduce gender stereotypes in roles, values and behaviours. The education sector, in collaboration with other sectors, should recognize, document, assess and validate any prior and ongoing learning undertaken by women on the basis of its relevance to their livelihoods ([UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning](#)). Girls and women should be encouraged to develop their self-esteem as valuable members of their family and society, strive for economic independence, and value income-generating skills from an early age ([Khadidja Nene Doucoure](#), [Mahesh Chander](#), [Mahtab S. Bamji](#), [Salome Amao](#), [Samuel Opoku Gyamfi](#), [Judith D'Souza](#), [Margot Tapia](#)).

In addition to school education, religious scholars can play a very important role as catalysts for change in the social norms governing gender, consequently allowing women to access education and employment. To support this, social and behaviour change communication programmes targeting these influencers need to be set up ([Dr Amanullah](#), [Sidra Mazhar](#)).

Flexible pathways for education and training are important in fostering rural women's business skills and opportunities for employment. Knowing how to access market information, as well as basic financial knowledge, negotiation skills and

decision-making, are all necessary for women to successfully engage with private sector players ([Morgane Danielou](#)). Indeed the process of travelling outside the home area to attend a training course or meetings with officials is, in itself, empowering. This frees women from their daily tasks and exposes them to new ideas and ways of working. It naturally places them in a leadership role in their home community, creating ripples of change among those they interact with ([Joycia Thorat](#)). In Togo, members of Mothers' Clubs who are trained in community health, sanitation and hygiene become secondary-level trainers as they share their knowledge with their family and others in the community ([Joy Muller](#)). Education needs to embrace a wide agenda, including HIV/AIDS awareness and family planning. In Armenia, women found it easier to attend training when there were women trainers and their husbands were invited to the training as well; this proved an effective way to overcome the mistrust of the men ([Astghik Sahakyan](#)). Indeed, during the 1980s farm crisis in the USA, women took on leading roles in farm activism, including doing primary issue work in farm organizations and serving on their boards ([Brad Wilson](#)).

## Information and communication technology

Grassroots knowledge-sharing efforts can be extremely beneficial by allowing women to access, internalize and develop information and knowledge that allows them to contest disempowering conditions and ultimately to grow and thrive together ([UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning](#), [Margot Tapia](#), [Joy Muller](#)).

Radio is a key technological tool that should not be underestimated: women in rural areas tend to exchange information by word of mouth and often by listening to the radio in their vernacular language.



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Access to information is also being improved, albeit at a slower pace for women and girls than for men and boys, through the multitude of different forms of information and communication technology (Sudharani N., Mahesh Chander, Bertha Yiberla Yenwo, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning). Social media can also have a powerful impact by challenging established patterns and encouraging women and girls to be more assertive (Mahesh Chander).

In Kenya, women's groups collaborated with youth groups to generate resource maps using Geographic Information Systems; the maps helped them to define and articulate their development needs with the county (Queen Katembu). Through the SheTrades app (run by the International Trade Centre in collaboration with Google and CI&T, a Brazilian technology company), women entrepreneurs are able to share information about their companies, increase their visibility, expand networks, and become more international. SheTrades, which aims to connect one million women entrepreneurs to market by 2020, also helps corporations to include more women entrepreneurs in their supply chains (Morgane Danielou).

### Supporting women in their farming and off-farm work

Women's time is often divided between agricultural tasks and caregiving. In order to ensure they have equal productive entitlements, it is necessary to provide support to women for their care work. Along with encouraging men to share caregiving responsibilities, governments also need to ensure the provision of reliable and good quality facilities for child care and feeding, especially during the peak agricultural season (Nitya Rao). The state could play an important supporting role by ensuring that mechanisms are in place to provide appropriate farm tools (preferably fabricated locally) and necessary training for women (Taibat Moji Yusuf, Aanand Kumar).

### Promoting private sector engagement

The private sector can play an important role in supporting female farmers by including more women entrepreneurs in its supply chains. There has been however some resistance from the private sector in fully engaging with women, due to prevailing social norms and the assumption that they have poor purchasing capacity – hence dealing with them will not result in "good business" (Aanand Kumar, Muthoni Nguthi, Catherine van der Wees).

Private sector involvement can be more effective if donors and national governments ensure that enabling environments are geared towards the establishment of public-private partnerships (PPP) to share risks (Santosh Kumar Mishra). Prospective private partners need the incentive and capacity to change.

Cooperatives and other enterprises enable smallholder women farmers to aggregate their harvests, negotiate better prices, and introduce value-added processing, thereby improving their position in the value chain and reducing potential risks (Morgane Danielou, Rieky Stuart). Cooperatives also provide a forum through which women can develop their leadership skills (Mahesh Chander).

Food and agricultural systems are rapidly changing in global, regional and national markets, providing rural women with new economic opportunities but also confronting them with significant challenges. A value chain approach embraces these challenges and empowers women to strengthen their market engagement, add value to existing products, and move into new areas of the chain. The FAO Developing Gender-Sensitive Value Chains framework analyses women's access to resources and services as well as their power and agency. This includes their capabilities, self-confidence and decision-making power, including intrahousehold dynamics (Alejandra Safa, Valentina Franchi, Nozomi Ide). One way to reach the poorest and most vulnerable women through the value chain approach is to focus initially on crops/livestock where they are already present or could easily integrate, and to reposition food crops/livestock to become market-oriented crops (Khadidja Nene Doucoure).

Women can create their own opportunities to overcome the challenges they face. For instance, in the northern part of Côte d'Ivoire, women who have been excluded from accessing land have invested in sectors with remunerative potential, namely the production of shea butter and handicrafts. In addition to helping these women in gaining autonomy and providing a source of revenue, these activities create an important link in the relationship between villages and the cities where the produce is sold (Kouakou Valentin Kra). These activities also allow the women to position themselves as the main actors of the rural economy, generating stable income that is not subject to the uncertainties of seasonal agricultural produce.

### Concluding comments

The diversity of contributions to the online discussion painted a rich picture of the lives of rural women and girls. There are "islands of happiness" where both women and men enjoy the benefits of addressing negative social norms and achieving greater gender equality (Juliane Friedrich). The challenges for the 2030 Agenda are threefold: how to more systematically address the underlying social norms that perpetuate gender inequalities; how to replicate positive experiences and take them to scale; and how to be nimble and flexible in order to respond to the ever-changing context in which rural women and girls live their lives.



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FAO – Dimitra Project  
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IFAD – Household methodologies toolkit  
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