



Statement by the Director-General of FAO, Jacques Diouf,
for the launch of *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-1*

“Women in agriculture: Closing the gender gap for development”

Monday, 7 March 2011 at 11:00 hrs

FAO Headquarters, Iran Room

*Ladies and Gentlemen,
Our dear friends from the Media,*

First of all, I would like to welcome you to FAO for the launch of the new edition of *The State of Food and Agriculture*, best known as SOFA. This time, we look at the issue of “Women in agriculture”.

The central message of this year's SOFA report is that, closing the gender gap in agriculture would reduce the number of undernourished in the world by as much as 100-to-150 million people. That is equivalent to a 12 to 15 percent reduction in hunger and would make a significant contribution to MDG1. This is certainly a striking finding.

The analysis presented in the report makes a powerful business case for ending discrimination against women in agriculture. It is one of the best investments we can make in boosting agricultural yields, increasing agricultural production and economic growth, and reducing hunger and poverty. Gender inequality is not just a problem for women -- it is a problem for all Agriculture Ministers. It is a problem for FAO. It is a problem for all of us.

Researchers from many regions tell us that women farmers do not produce as much from their farms as men. The yield gap is often 20 to 30 percent. But it's not because women are bad farmers. Quite the contrary. The real problem is that women don't have the same access to land, credit, seeds, fertilizers, tools, extension advice and education. They use fewer inputs, so they produce less. It's that simple. The yield increase on the land controlled by women could lead to increase agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4 percent.

We all know how diverse agricultural systems are around the world. And the roles women play in agriculture and rural economies are equally diverse. But the one fact about women in agriculture which appears to be true everywhere is that gender inequality in access to resources and opportunities keeps women from being as productive as they could be.

The gender gap in rural areas extends beyond the farm. Women make up a significant proportion of the rural labour force, on farms certainly, but also in the rapidly growing agro-industrial processing and export sector where women often comprise 75 percent of the workforce. These jobs offer excellent opportunities for women to earn better incomes and improve their own and their families' well-being.

Yet women in this sector are more likely than men to be segregated in low-wage, part-time and seasonal jobs. More needs to be done to ensure equal opportunities for women in this dynamic sector.

At the same time, contract farming is emerging as an effective means of linking smallholders to expanding urban and export markets. Women provide much of the labour on these contract farms, yet they are almost completely excluded from entering contracts themselves. Women farmers often lack secure tenure over land and control over other resources to enable them to ensure delivery on production contracts. In some places, women are legally prevented from signing contracts or opening bank accounts in their own right.

The reduction in hunger and undernourishment is just the most direct and immediate gain. There would be a series of other positive effects emanating from this.

Eliminating more pervasive forms of discrimination against women in agriculture would yield more and larger benefits.

What's more, putting increased income in the hands of women is a proven strategy for improving outcomes for children in terms of nutrition, health and education. Healthy children are human capital, the true wealth of any dynamic economy.

The policy conclusions coming out of this report are clear. First, countries need to eliminate discrimination against women in access to agricultural resources, education, extension and financial services, and also labour markets. Second, investments in labour-saving and productivity-enhancing technologies and infrastructure are required to free women's time for more productive activities. Third, actions should be taken to facilitate the participation of women in flexible, efficient and fair rural labour markets.

The State of Food and Agriculture calculates the costs of gender inequality in agriculture and provides important insights in how policies and programmes can overcome these costs. We must achieve gender equality and empower women, not just because it is the right thing to do, but also because it makes economic sense.

As you know, tomorrow the world will observe the International Women Day. We hope our efforts to devoting this new edition of SOFA to women will contribute to this celebration.

I thank you for your kind attention.