

# Gender equality and women's empowerment



Enabling poor rural people to overcome poverty

What does gender equality look like? Gender equality exists where women and men have equal access to opportunities and services, equal control over resources, and an equal say in decisions at all levels. Evidence demonstrates that where gender equality is greater, there is higher economic growth and a better quality of life for all.

A recent World Bank report shows that women now represent more than 40 per cent of the global labour force, 43 per cent of the global agricultural labour force and more than half of the world's university students. Productivity will rise if their skills are fully employed. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that if women had equal access to productive inputs such as improved seeds and fertilizers, yields from their fields would increase by 20 to 30 per cent. This would boost total agricultural output by up to 4 per cent in developing countries, reducing the number of hungry people globally by 12 to 17 per cent, or 100 million to 150 million people.

In many parts of the developing world, however, gender inequalities continue to be extreme. This is particularly true in rural areas.

Rural women and girls have many roles and many responsibilities. They are farmers, carers, wage labourers, microentrepreneurs. And they often spend many hours fetching water and collecting firewood. In developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, women typically work 12 hours per week



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more than men. Yet their contributions are often 'invisible' and unpaid.

Women are held back by many dimensions of inequality: lack of education, unequal workloads and property rights, limited control over resources and limited participation in the decisions that affect their lives. These conditions are severely demotivating for women and, in turn, contribute to low levels of productivity. For example, when a farming family starts to market produce commercially, often women find they bear the burden of additional work without sharing in the income gained. However, when conditions become more equitable, women are more engaged, productivity increases and the whole family benefits.

## Investing in women in agriculture

Today, smallholder agriculture is changing rapidly as a result of commercialization,

globalization, climate change, and new technologies and migration patterns. This makes it essential to recognize the key role women play in agriculture, along with men. They need support and investment to help them adapt to these changes and to seize emerging opportunities. Entire communities benefit socially and economically when women have access to land, water, education, training, extension and financial services, and strong organizations.

The message is clear: the empowerment of women is fundamental to reduce poverty, hunger and malnutrition. In order for poor rural communities to prosper and grow in an inclusive way, women's voices must be heard and greater gender equality is essential. As some of the stories on this factsheet clearly show, when women are empowered – economically and socially – they become leaders and agents of change.

# Leading change for poor women in India

Sakuntala Sabaro has changed her life and the lives of women in her village and beyond. A member of the Saora tribe and a leading participant of the IFAD-supported Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihoods Programme, Sabaro is the Secretary of the Sukalyani Shakti Dala Self-Help Group and President of the Self-Help Group Federation. She has also convinced 25 local women and men farmers to adopt the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) cultivation method, enabling them to boost chronically low yields of this staple crop.

Sabaro is truly a leader of change. When she set up the self-help group with the women in her village, the first thing they did was to start a courageous campaign against alcohol abuse. Alcoholism was rampant in their neighbourhood and was the prime cause of much domestic violence.

“We ... marched through the village, knocked on every door and spoke about the evils of consuming alcohol,” says Sabaro. “Now the men are gradually changing.”

The group has made a huge difference to the members’ lives. “We didn’t have enough food or money and were scared to discuss our problems, but now ... belonging to a group, we feel empowered,” says Sabaro. “Whenever we wish to take up an issue, we wear our green *saree* and go together. This strength has made us very confident.”

Their first joint money-making venture was tamarind – the sweet and sour pulp widely used in cooking in India. At first, they processed the pulp by hand and made a profit of about US\$56 on 5,000 kilograms. In 2009 they started selling tamarind through collective marketing and this helped them cut out intermediaries who were taking a large slice of the profits. The following year the group bought a tamarind press machine. This saved two hours a day and lightened the load of manually pressing the tamarind pulp into small brick-shapes.

“Being a leader is not easy,” says Sabaro. “You have to lead by example and most times it is a risk.”

In Baunsipada, another remote village reached by the same IFAD-funded programme, 12 women from the Bonda tribe have learnt to assemble solar LED lanterns for sale through their self-help group. Just one month after they received their first training, the group is already getting orders from schools and other institutions in the district. The solar lanterns replace kerosene lamps, which are costly and dangerous. Sankhi Khirsani, an 18-year-old girl who is part of the venture, points out that the lanterns also help women in their other income-earning activities. “The bright portable lights allow handicraft work, such as making brooms, to be done at all hours, not just during the daytime,” she says.

## IFAD’s gender policy

IFAD is committed to empowering women and is working with families, communities and countries to build gender equality at every level. In 2012 the organization’s Executive Board approved the IFAD Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment. The policy is central to the goal of IFAD’s Strategic Framework 2011-2015 – enabling poor rural women and men to improve their food security and nutrition, raise their incomes and strengthen their resilience.

Strengthening gender equality has multiple benefits and boosts the impact and effectiveness of development. In particular, greater gender equality:

- makes a major contribution to improving food and nutrition security and reducing child malnutrition
- contributes to inclusive economic growth that lifts people out of poverty



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### KEY FACTS

- Giving women the same access as men to agricultural resources and inputs could increase production on women’s farms by 20-30 per cent, reducing the number of hungry people in the world by 100 to 150 million.
- Women comprise almost 50 per cent of the agricultural labour force in Eastern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and 20 per cent in Latin America.
- In developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, women typically work 12 to 13 hours per week more than men.
- Men’s landholdings average three times those of women. Women represent fewer than 5 per cent of agricultural landholders in North Africa and Western Asia, and an average of 15 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa.
- In developing countries up to 45 per cent of the poorest women have no say in decisions taken about how their own income is spent.
- In most regions women and girls still lag behind in education, particularly in rural areas where female household heads sometimes have less than half the years of education of their male counterparts.

- increases household income and assets, and benefits entire households
- develops the skills base of rural communities
- helps protect the natural environment
- enhances the relevance and effectiveness of development interventions
- makes projects more sustainable.

The gender policy has three strategic objectives:

- Promote economic empowerment to enable rural women and men to participate in and benefit from profitable economic activities.
- Enable women and men to have equal voice and influence in rural institutions and organizations.
- Achieve a more equitable balance in workloads and in the sharing of economic and social benefits between women and men.

Read the full policy at: [http://www.ifad.org/gender/policy/gender\\_e.pdf](http://www.ifad.org/gender/policy/gender_e.pdf)

## Young women train as vets in Yemen

Education is key to women's empowerment but training options are sometimes just distant dreams and aspirations for poor rural women. A group of courageous young Yemeni women have seized the opportunity to train as veterinary professionals with support from an IFAD-funded project.

With the help of Aiman, community and gender development officer of the Al-Dhala Community Resource Management Project, eight young women enrolled as students at the Veterinary Technical Institute in the capital, Sana'a. Initially, their families blocked the move, but the project management enlisted the support of local elders and sheikhs and won them round. The next hurdle was to gain admission to the institute, which was successfully overcome with the help of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Despite the worsening security situation in Yemen, two of the young women – Hassnaa and Asma – have gained their qualifications and returned to their villages to use their new skills. Asma works as an extension agent, sharing her knowledge with local farmers, and provides veterinary services.

Hassnaa has successfully set up her own veterinary clinic – a significant break with tradition in a male-dominated area. The two young women have become a source of inspiration and knowledge for their communities.

The other students are due to qualify in 2012 and 2013 following a period in which the training institute was closed because of the security situation. As a result of the young women's outstanding performance, the institute has removed any gender-based barriers and admissions are now open to women without discrimination.

An increasing number of young women students from other villages in Al Dhala are applying to the institute and the number of rural households prepared to send their young women to study in Sana'a is gradually rising.





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## Lightening the load in Kenya

Elizabeth Wanjiru, from the Kiambu District of central Kenya, used to spend as many as six hours a day fetching water for her family. The nearest spring was 2 kilometres away, queues were long and the water was filled with sediment. Now she spends just two minutes fetching clean water from the new communal water point about 30 metres from her home.

The IFAD-funded Central Kenya Dry Area Smallholder and Community Services Development Project, which closed last year, made better access to water and health services a starting point for improving the well-being of women and their dependants. Overall, 26 shallow wells were built to serve 32,000 people and 17 new piped schemes were constructed. In addition, 20 springs were developed and 24 rain water tanks were built for primary schools.

Clean water improves hygiene and cuts the incidence of disease. Easing women's workloads gives them extra hours in the day. Some choose to use the time to plant and tend kitchen gardens or start profitable small enterprises. Through women's groups organized by the project, the women learnt about better livestock breeds and crop species, and how to prevent soil erosion and harvest rainwater. And they learnt new skills such as beekeeping and aquaculture.

The project also introduced some simple, cost-effective and environmentally friendly ways of improving household conditions as well as saving time, such as energy-saving stoves and biogas units that convert animal manure into gas for cooking and for heating water.

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## Weaving a better future in Guatemala

Women and men cannot be economically empowered without access to markets. For poor rural producers in developing countries around the world, distance and disconnection from functioning markets is a huge challenge. Women are often doubly disadvantaged, particularly when they lack literacy and numeracy skills and tradition prevents them from joining producers' groups that give them bargaining power.

In Guatemala, indigenous women weavers are now connecting to profitable overseas markets with support from IFAD and practical guidance from AGEXPORT, the Guatemalan exporters' association.

Maria Ana Gonzalez leads a group of 11 weavers who are exporting to the United States under their own label. With advice from Gaby Gomez, an industrial designer working for AGEXPORT, Gonzalez's group has learnt to blend traditional colours and techniques with modern designs.

Gonzalez's group has also benefited from IFAD support for business training and access to loans to upgrade their looms. The women and men weavers involved in the new venture are now earning up to 90 per cent more than when they sold their textiles only on local markets.

Crucially, Gonzalez has also learnt how to calculate the costs of materials and labour. Before she learnt how to do this, she was often selling at a loss. Holding up a cloth with all the colours of the rainbow, she says modestly, "This is one of our designs. People like it a lot. It sells well here and also abroad."

Dream weaver: watch the video [http://youtu.be/BYPh\\_Zmjdml](http://youtu.be/BYPh_Zmjdml)



IFAD is an international financial institution and a specialized United Nations agency dedicated to eradicating poverty and hunger in rural areas of developing countries.

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