



# The changing role of women in the economic transformation of family farming in Asia and the Pacific

## **FAMILY FARMING IN A CHANGING CONTEXT**

### **The Asia-Pacific context**

Asia and the Pacific is a very socially, culturally and economically diverse region. Trade liberalization and foreign investments have contributed to rapid economic, human capital and agricultural growth, and decreased price distortions. However, the benefits have been unevenly shared among and within countries and between men and women. Export-oriented policies have resulted in reduced investments for domestic markets, leaving rural populations behind and threatening food and nutrition security. Despite progress in food security and poverty reduction, the region still has more than 500 million hungry people.<sup>1</sup> In 2011, 743 million people – about 20 per cent of the total population – were living in extreme poverty (on less than US\$1.25 PPP),<sup>2</sup> with significant disparities across the region.

Urbanization and changing consumption patterns and diets have led to changes in food supply chains. Agribusinesses and emerging supermarkets are exercising increasing control, requiring regular supplies of food and more stringent food safety and quality standards.

Asia and the Pacific is the world's most populous region and also the most ecologically and climatically vulnerable. The region is expected to face higher temperatures, changing weather patterns, increasing water scarcity, and more intense severe weather events such as storms, floods and landslides. Agriculture and fisheries, which are critical for food security, are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts. In the Pacific Islands, ocean warming, disappearing fish populations, coastal erosion and rising sea levels threaten the livelihoods of thousands of families, sometimes forcing them to leave their homes and relocate to other countries.<sup>3</sup>

Asia also faces acute pressure on its land resources because of soil degradation, deforestation and competing land uses. While the region as a whole has reversed deforestation trends, issues related to land governance remain critical to the adoption of landscape management approaches<sup>4</sup> that satisfy the multiple demands for timber, fibre, feed, biofuel and agricultural land.

### **Persistence of family farming**

Family farming remains the predominant form of agriculture in Asia and the Pacific. Family enterprises in agriculture, forestry and fishery production play key roles in food security, local economies, sustainable use of natural resources, and climate change mitigation and adaptation.<sup>5</sup> Smallholder farmers produce most of the food consumed in their households and up to 80 per cent of the food produced in Asia.<sup>6</sup> Families often cultivate different plots for household consumption and the market.

Farms are typically very small, averaging less than 2 hectares (0.24 hectares in Bangladesh, 0.32 hectares in Viet Nam, and less than 2 hectares for nearly 98 per cent in China).<sup>7</sup> While the specific situations of small farms differ among countries, there are common characteristics: most labour is provided by family members, although seasonal labour may be hired; and smallholder family farms in remote areas with few or poor-quality roads have limited access to markets, extension services and other social infrastructure such as health and education, which impedes their productivity and development.

Pressure on natural resources and lack of opportunities in rural areas have caused outmigration to urban areas or neighbouring countries in search of work, especially for men but also for women and youth. Women, children and elders are left in the villages, with women usually taking the responsibility for sustaining the family farm. Situations vary in terms of who migrates and the contribution of women to farming operations. In the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam, for example, women may use remittances to purchase farming inputs and hire labour, or shift from farm to other activities such as raising small livestock for sale, or operating small businesses.<sup>8</sup> In situations of extreme poverty, children (especially girls) may be taken out of school to help with household chores or in the field, and may engage in unsupervised activities that are hazardous for their ages or physical conditions, such as through exposure to toxic chemicals, dangerous tools, long working hours and animal and waterborne diseases.<sup>9</sup>

The increased demand for agricultural products for growing urban populations has brought market opportunities for a range of producers, but also presents the risk of marginalizing family farmers who cannot satisfy market requirements. Lack of economies of scale, high transportation costs, and lack of access to credit, technologies and extension services restrict family farmers' capacity to satisfy demands for volume, quality and regularity.

One challenge will be creating an appropriate environment to enable smallholders to benefit from new market opportunities. Institutional arrangements that bring smallholders together and link them to actors in the public and private sectors can facilitate access to inputs, support services and markets, and bargaining power in agricultural value chains.<sup>10</sup>

## **THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN FAMILY FARMING – OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

The feminization of agricultural work results in part from the coping strategies adopted by rural families to increase and diversify incomes and livelihoods. These strategies are gendered: men usually work with lucrative crops, or migrate as seasonal or permanent workers; while women cultivate the family plot for household consumption, care for small livestock, and process and/or sell part of their production in local markets. Women may also migrate to find employment.



## Opportunities

Rural women engage in farm and off-farm economic activities to ensure their families' food security and diversify income sources. They contribute to agricultural and rural economies with their labour and valuable knowledge of crop varieties, biodiversity and agricultural practices. Their off-farm work is often low-skilled and low-paid, but is particularly important in facing the adverse shocks that affect agriculture, such as droughts or floods. Women's share in the agricultural labour force ranges from about 35 to 50 per cent in subregions of Asia and the Pacific.<sup>4</sup>

Women's increasing role in family farming could be an opportunity for enhancing their economic and social empowerment as producers, traders, workers and entrepreneurs. If women have the same access as men to extension services, technologies and loans, they can contribute to improving the agricultural productivity of family farms, engage in processing and marketing activities, and increase their voice in household decisions.

Self-help groups and other organizations have a major role in building women's self-confidence, providing access to financial opportunities and training, and engaging in collective processing and marketing of agricultural and other value-added products. Agribusiness entrepreneurs can also benefit from well-organized family farming groups or cooperatives.

When women control the additional income from their multiple activities, they usually spend it on their children (education, health, clothing) and improved nutrition and well-being for their families.<sup>11</sup>

## Challenges

The constraints that are common to all family farmers are often exacerbated for rural women because restrictive customary norms on women's role in households and public life limit their ability to make decisions and seize opportunities.

Women in smallholder family farms have greater overall workloads than men, combining household responsibilities (cooking, cleaning, collecting fuelwood and water), care of children and the elderly, farming activities, and often non-farm activities such as market trading, value addition or labouring. Women typically work 12 hours per week more than men.<sup>12</sup> This situation leads to time poverty and lost opportunities for women to attend training, invest in other income-generating activities or participate in community-based organizations.

Fiji: man and woman at work in a coconut grove.



Women own little agricultural land across the region. (An exception is Bhutan, where they own 60 per cent of the land because of traditional matrilineal inheritance practices.)<sup>13</sup> Most agricultural land is under customary authority, which grants access rights to men. In South Asia, where agriculture employs 60 per cent of economically active women, only 7 per cent of women are farm holders.<sup>13</sup> As well as being excluded from land rights, women also lack access to other inputs and services (quality seeds, technology, financial and extension services, etc.) that are crucial to increasing agricultural productivity.

Norms and patriarchal cultures continue to favour boys. Girls' access to education has progressed, with discrepancies among subregions, but girls are still more likely than boys to drop out of school. In South Asia, almost half of all adult women are illiterate, compared with 27 per cent of men.<sup>13</sup>

Women's participation in the non-agricultural workforce or in public life still lags behind in several countries. In rural areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, women have limited mobility and are prohibited from having contact with men, which reduces their opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship. In the Pacific Islands, approximately twice as many men as women engage in paid employment outside the agriculture sector.<sup>14</sup>

Violence against women is endemic in the region, restricting women's freedom to move and exploit new opportunities, as well as reducing their overall well-being. It is estimated that one third of South Asian women experience violence in their lives.<sup>15</sup> The Pacific Islands has the highest incidence of violence against women in the world. Among major contributing factors are traditional attitudes to male and female roles, jealousy about women's increasing visibility in public or economic sectors, and high levels of alcohol abuse among men.<sup>14</sup> Laws against violence – when they exist – are seldom enforced.<sup>15</sup>

Women's participation in decision-making on land use and income expenditure depends on intra-household dynamics. Apart from in Southeast Asia, women throughout the region have little decision-making power at the household level, including on the use of their own earnings. Women's decision-making power increases with wealth,<sup>13, 14, 16</sup> but their voice and influence in the public domain remain generally low. Women are often excluded from decision-making processes related to natural resource management, especially in the forestry sector.<sup>17</sup>

Inexistent or poor sanitary conditions in public places such as markets – including lack of toilets for women – and lack of childcare services are additional barriers to women's engagement in training and commercial activities.

## **INVESTING IN WOMEN IS INVESTING IN FAMILY FARMING**

*"Where gender equality is greater, there is higher economic growth and a better quality of life for all."<sup>12</sup>*

### **Gender issues within the family**

The farm household model is not unitary,<sup>11</sup> and its different elements need to be examined to identify and exploit opportunities. Households do not act as a single unit when making decisions. It is important to understand the different roles and responsibilities of all family members (women/men, girls/boys) in the production and marketing process. The social and cultural contexts that affect differential rights and access to and control over productive resources require particular attention.

IFAD is developing methodologies for supporting family members in developing their household livelihood strategies. The goal is to work with both women and men on determining common priorities and making joint decisions about what is best for the family and the family business, including the distribution of workloads and roles.<sup>18</sup> Addressing gender inequalities is often part of households' solutions to these issues.

### **Reducing women's time constraints and drudgery**

Enabling women to expand their choices in family farming requires easing their workloads and reducing their time poverty. This can be achieved by redistributing domestic chores and promoting labour- and time-saving technologies. The IFAD-funded Rural Income Diversification Project in Tuyen Quang Province, Viet Nam (2002-2010) offered training and workshops on issues such as the division of labour in households and the community, the prevention of

domestic violence, and women's participation in decision-making processes. Labour-saving equipment such as threshing machines and handpumps was made available, and men started to take on more of the domestic chores usually done by women. Women had time to attend training courses and village meetings and to market produce.<sup>16</sup>

### **Supporting women's groups**

Empowering women starts with building their self-confidence. Experiences across the region have shown that self-help groups (SHGs) are key to building women's confidence, voice and bargaining power. SHGs provide a safe space for women to learn new skills, discuss and design their own solutions, implement joint actions, obtain access to productive resources (especially loans), and process and market products.

*Kamalbai is a woman farmer who joined an SHG supported by IFAD's Tejaswini Rural Women's Empowerment Programme. Through the SHG she obtained access to loans and started livelihood activities such as growing vegetables for sale in local markets, livestock raising and kitchen gardening. This increased her income and provided her family with better food. Her participation in the SHG also revealed Kamalbai's natural leadership skills. Encouraged by her community, she won elections to become Sarpanch (head of village). "From being extremely shy in even talking to men in my own family, today I have no apprehensions in talking to anyone, from State officials to bank staff or even the Chief Minister."<sup>19</sup>*

Women sometimes use the SHG for social purposes such as banning alcohol consumption or violence against women and girls in their villages. In Madhya Pradesh, India, an empowerment project initiated by the State Government and supported by IFAD facilitated the formation of *Shaurya Dal* or "Courage Brigades". Each brigade comprises five women from the SHG and five men from the village who work together to change attitudes at the household level, combating domestic abuse, caste violence, alcoholism and malnutrition.<sup>20</sup>

*"Often the best solution lies not with law enforcement but by using community pressure to address problems," says Manoj Nayak, District Programme Manager, Tejaswini Rural Women's Empowerment Programme.<sup>20</sup>*

### **Combining targeted support to women with sensitization of men**

At both the household and community levels, it is essential that targeted support to women be combined with the sensitization of men and community leaders to build acceptance of women's empowerment. Resistance usually fades when positive results – especially additional income – start to flow. By providing women with agricultural and financial management skills, an IFAD-supported pilot project under Indonesia's National Programme for Community Empowerment improved families' livelihoods and changed the lives of women. In this very patriarchal society, men did not want women's role to change, but were interested in making more money. Facilitators worked with community leaders to define needs and identify solutions. Women were trained and increased their incomes from sales of vegetables. They were proud to become their families' main breadwinners, and are now treated with respect. They have their own bank accounts and decide how to use their incomes. The success of this project results from its focus on local needs and agricultural potential, taking into account existing social structures. The Indonesian Government is considering replicating the project across the country.<sup>21</sup>

### **Supporting women-friendly value chains**

Women's economic empowerment is essential to advancing their voice and leadership. Providing financial and technical services to develop local value chains can assist women's engagement in commercial activities. In Bangladesh, the IFAD-supported Microfinance and Technical Support Project (2003-2012) created a community-based value chain for poultry. The project provided microcredit and technical and social training (in hygiene, health, legal rights) to women and men. Women's mobility increased and their roles within households and the community changed. They now have more control over their incomes and are engaging in public affairs.<sup>13</sup>



### **Building women's leadership in institutions**

Women need to participate in community-based organizations such as those for natural resource management (water, forest) and disaster risk preparedness. Such participation enhances not only gender equity, but also efficiency and effectiveness. It may require the establishment of a minimum quota for women's participation; leadership and negotiation training for women; and sensitization of men – village leaders, local governments, husbands – on the benefits of mobilizing women. In some cases, women will need to establish their own organizations. Through different types of collaboration (federations, platforms, networks, etc.) women can engage in the policy dialogues that affect their lives. However, changing individuals and institutions takes time, so longer-term approaches to projects and programmes are needed.<sup>22</sup>

### **MOVING FORWARD**

Asia and the Pacific is at a turning point in economic development. Decisions that are made today will have consequences for future generations in the region and the world. Gender equality could also be at a turning point.

There is now wide agreement that a shift to sustainable, inclusive and equitable development models is indispensable for eradicating poverty and reducing inequalities. Family farming should have a central role in such strategies. Underlying challenges include creating the conditions to support family farming that provides households with decent incomes and living conditions; enhancing the capabilities of rural women and men to seize opportunities for engaging in local, national and international agricultural value chains, while contributing to food and nutrition security and environmental sustainability; selecting the most appropriate business model for family farming (small-scale, large-scale, collaborative arrangements); and identifying how these efforts will affect women and gender relations. The following sections outline ways of overcoming these challenges.

### **Expanding women's choices in family farming**

Women food producers in subsistence agriculture contribute to family and community food security but may be confined to their existing roles, face time and mobility constraints, and lack economic independence.

When women become independent producers and entrepreneurs, their bigger role in agrifood value chains may contribute to their empowerment and improved livelihoods.

Viet Nam: grinding grain for animal feed.



However, these developments often challenge traditional gender roles and customary norms and require economically and environmentally sustainable value chains that are in line with women's production and processing activities. Women need increased bargaining power (often through groups) to negotiate mutually beneficial partnerships with other stakeholders (larger growers, traders, marketing companies, input companies, etc.).

Women – and other family members – may also decide to engage in a combination of farm, off-farm waged work and/or non-agricultural work, depending on the context.

Different approaches must be pursued simultaneously. Ultimately, this means expanding the choices of men and women<sup>23</sup> and supporting them according to their own priorities and the needs of their families. Women should have the same opportunities as men for engaging in sustainable and resilient agriculture, local markets and economies, agricultural value chains, and decent waged employment in the agriculture or other sectors of the local economy. Women must therefore be fully engaged in policymaking and priority setting for agricultural research and investments.

### **Building knowledge for gender-sensitive policies and programmes**

Family farmers are not a homogeneous group, and the situation of women also differs, among and within countries. Policies and programmes to support family farmers must take into account the different needs and constraints of each member of the family (men, women and youth) and be tailored to the specific cultural and economic context.<sup>24</sup>

Collecting sex-disaggregated data, undertaking targeted research and systematic gender analysis, monitoring progress, and documenting what works where and why are essential to improving understanding of gender-related constraints and priorities and supporting women and men appropriately.

Based on this knowledge, strategies for reducing the gender gap in agriculture may include affirmative action in favour of women, such as land allocations, gender quotas for project activities, women-only consultations, women-friendly arrangements for extension and training services (location, time, availability of childcare services, etc.), and investments in technologies that reduce women's drudgery and time constraints.

Governments also need to consider policies that ensure women's social (reproductive, marriage, freedom from violence) and political rights and remove existing discriminatory laws (as mentioned in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women).

### **Working with men to challenge gender-discriminatory norms**

Working with men at the household and community levels – husbands, community leaders, male relatives, etc. – and discussing gender issues are essential to understanding gender-related power relations, facilitating changes in attitudes and traditional leadership structures that marginalize women, and encouraging the redistribution of household activities.

It is important to facilitate collaboration and dialogue between men and women to encourage men's support of women's empowerment. In very patriarchal contexts, men will be more open to change when they see the benefits of women's empowerment (increased income, improved nutrition, education of children, etc.). However, it is important to be aware of the violence and jealousy that may occur in the process of empowering women in economic activities and public life and to identify mitigation strategies, such as community support groups, media campaigns and enforcement of the law.

Specific resources and support need to target women's organizations and participatory approaches at the community level, to increase women's self-confidence and voice in community decision-making processes and to ensure that men recognize women's value and knowledge.

### **Making family farming more attractive**

Making family farming more attractive for women and men, particularly youth, is essential to ensuring food security and reducing poverty in rural areas. A twofold strategy is needed: creating an enabling environment for family businesses to thrive (access to credit, technology, information, markets, roads, storage facilities, etc.); and ensuring good living conditions in rural areas (access to schools, health and childcare services, clean drinking-water, electricity, etc.).

Policies and investments that support the improvement of family farmers' livelihoods can include social protection measures that benefit rural women and men; legislation that protects farmers from land grabbing and land insecurity; investments that respect rural community's rights; and the establishment of protected areas (forests, biodiversity, aquatic systems, etc.) that create local employment.

One of the challenges to agricultural transformation in the Asia-Pacific region is finding the right balance among different models of family farming, including subsistence agriculture, commercial agriculture with larger farms that support local employment, and contractual arrangements between organizations of family farmers and agribusinesses.<sup>22</sup> Support to food and nutrition security and the sustainable management of natural resources should be part of the equation. Women and men must be involved in this debate.

The private sector's increasing role in food value chains and agribusinesses calls for dialogue between the private sector and governments, supported by development agencies, international organizations, academia and civil society, to build partnerships and make agreements based on acceptable trade-offs and outcomes for all parties. For example, gender-sensitive codes of conduct on engagement between agribusinesses and family farms could protect farmers – especially women – from exploitation.

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## LINKS

IFAD Gender equality and women's  
empowerment webpage:  
<http://www.ifad.org/gender/index.htm>

IFAD policy on gender equality and  
women's empowerment  
[http://www.ifad.org/gender/policy/  
gender\\_e.pdf](http://www.ifad.org/gender/policy/gender_e.pdf)

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