

# What works for gender equality and women's empowerment – a review of practices and results

## Evaluation synthesis

### Executive summary

#### Background

1. This evaluation synthesis report on gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) practices and results was produced by the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE). Its main purpose is to support learning on what GEWE practices work and under what conditions, and to identify transformative GEWE practices that should be further promoted and scaled up in the future.
2. For the Tenth Replenishment of IFAD's Resources (IFAD10) period, IFAD has committed to improve its performance on gender practices, in particular the share of GEWE interventions aiming at transformative change. There is no agreed definition of 'transformative' within IFAD yet. For the purpose of this evaluation, we define transformative approaches as those that aim to overcome the root causes of inequality and discrimination through promoting sustainable, inclusive and far-reaching social change. Transformative approaches challenge existing social norms and the distribution of power and resources.
3. The synthesis reviews the operational part of IFAD's programme and, within this, programme and project-level interventions that addressed issues of GEWE within the context of the agricultural sector and rural development since 2011. The systematic review of evaluation findings draws from a sample of 57 IOE reports.
4. The synthesis provides a conceptual framework for identifying practices that have delivered GEWE results, in particular those that are transformative and thus relevant in the context of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The conceptual framework for this synthesis is captured in a theory of change, presenting pathways towards GEWE.

#### Main findings

5. Within the sample of 57 evaluations, the synthesis identified 121 GEWE practices, classified into four main types. Most common are practices to improve access to resources, services and opportunities (39 per cent). This is followed by practices to strengthen women's and men's awareness, consciousness and confidence (25 per cent) and practices that address political, legal and institutional constraints to GEWE (24 per cent). Practices to reduce women's time poverty are less common (12 per cent).
6. **Relevance.** The review found that guidance by IFAD's Gender Plan of Action and the IFAD Policy on gender equality and women's empowerment was important in ensuring that interventions were relevant and addressed key GEWE issues. IFAD's attention to key constraints highlighted by global gender indices, such as lack of access to rural financial services, time poverty and exclusion from group participation is highly relevant, also in the context of Agenda 2030. The interventions reviewed were generally in line with IFAD GEWE policy objectives, although the objective of balancing workloads was insufficiently addressed.
7. In terms of aligning interventions with women's priorities, the main assumption underlying most targeting strategies was that women are able to benefit through a participatory planning and implementation approach. To some extent, participatory processes are instrumental in addressing women's needs, and women often do benefit proportionally, even when not targeted. Nevertheless, explicit consideration

of women's needs is important and specific targeting strategies are relevant. There is also scope to better address the diversity of women (ethnic, religious, life cycle) and their needs, and to ensure that generally-held beliefs about gender and women are critically assessed.

8. **Effectiveness.** IFAD-supported interventions include a range of practices to improve women's access to economic resources and opportunities, often used in combination for effective results. Rural finance is the most common practice, but the evidence shows that the contribution of rural finance interventions to GEWE was mixed. Many projects report large numbers of women beneficiaries, but often this was the result of self-targeting or other factors, rather than deliberate targeting strategies. Financial services that worked with providers specifically serving women were more gender-inclusive.
9. Similarly the provision of general infrastructure, which has helped to improve women's lives in many cases, but needs to be combined with other practices to make an effective contribution to GEWE. Functional skills training is also common and widely reported as useful. Yet some evaluations raised concerns that the types of training provided tended to confirm traditional gender roles and stereotypes and were not sufficiently oriented to women's strategic needs.
10. Interventions enabling women to take up a role in value chains and marketing can make a significant contribution to GEWE. Backyard and home gardens can help enhance women's role in household food production and income generation, but were found less transformative. Positive examples of promoting women's income-generating activities (IGAs) were still rare in the sample reviewed. Practices addressing women's time poverty were generally found effective, but they need to be more widely applied.
11. Projects that used a highly participatory approach to community development were effective in achieving gender-inclusive results. They reached out to a large number of women and successfully mobilized them for community affairs. There are, however, no gender-transformative outcomes documented. Some evaluations have argued that community-driven approaches may generate substantial benefits for both genders, but are unlikely to transform traditional gender roles if they build on existing power relations, rather than challenging them. Challenging existing power relations requires additional strategies, for example facilitation through external change agents. Practices aiming to break gender roles and stereotypes and working with men were found to be highly effective. Practices to engage with policy makers on GEWE at national and local levels are still few and more attention is needed to building networks and alliances on GEWE beyond the local level.
12. **Impact.** IFAD has addressed root causes of gender inequality and women's powerlessness, in particular illiteracy, exclusion from access to resources and limited social capital. This is linked to the nature of IFAD-supported projects, which emphasize participatory approaches and community capacity-building, including group formation and functional skills training. These had a clear impact on women's self-esteem, status and recognition, and in a number of cases challenged gender roles and power relations, although the latter is not well-documented. Measures to protect women from violence have enabled them to claim public spaces, such as markets, which in some cases was among the enabling factors transforming women's lives. Social mobilization and strengthened leadership has helped women to also claim political spaces. Reducing drudgery and challenging gender norms have led to transformational changes in secluded and marginalized communities.
13. The most significant changes identified in the synthesis sample were enhanced women's confidence and self-esteem, literacy and functional skills and social capital. Some changes were also observed on cultural norms and practices, but they require further evidence and more systematic monitoring. Very few examples

of formal systemic change were documented, for example on laws, policies and government capacities.

14. **Transformative practices.** The synthesis found a number of practices that, in combination with other more conventional interventions, led to transformative changes. Reducing drudgery and challenging gender norms have led to transformational changes in secluded and marginalized communities, where in particular the provision of water as a common good had a catalytic effect.
15. Interventions that have a clear transformative purpose were found to be more effective for GEWE. An important transformative purpose is to break traditional gender roles and stereotypes through activities that can range from training, income generation or marketing, to participation in decision-making. This can also be part of social mobilization and leadership strategies.
16. The same benchmarks on transformative change cannot be applied in settings with very restrictive gender norms. In those most secluded and marginalized communities, even the provision of basic infrastructure triggered some transformative changes. In particular, the provision of domestic water has transformed community relations, including gender relations, in communities that were very conservative and where previously women had not been involved in public life. The projects specifically targeted women to get them involved in community affairs.
17. Although some practices may be more transformative than others, it is ultimately the combination of practices that brings about change. The synthesis therefore concludes that it is the use of multiple and complementary gender practices that facilitate changes in gender roles and relations. For example, practices to improve women's access to resources and opportunities in combination with practices to enhance women's and men's awareness and consciousness were found to be very effective.
18. Policy engagement on GEWE has not yet received sufficient attention and support, but it is an important element of a transformative approach. Important legal and policy constraints can be effectively addressed through engagement with government and women's organizations or networks at local and national level, building on good GEWE practices on the ground.
19. Building strategic networks and alliances on GEWE has proved successful in some cases, but was not systematically pursued. Powerful change agents for transformative approaches can be government partners or national agencies, if they are sufficiently sensitized. In many cases, microfinance institutions, cooperatives, NGOs, economic interest groups, indigenous organizations or district assemblies have been change agents. Also the sensitization of men and traditional leaders and making them change agents themselves has proved successful. Gender focal points are often seen as important change agents, although often they may not have been sufficiently empowered themselves to facilitate broader changes.
20. **Contributing factors.** The socio-economic and policy context matters and it is often insufficiently understood and addressed. Important drivers of discrimination and exclusion, for example customary land rights excluding women, are often not addressed. Effective change can be hindered by overly complex project designs, lack of gender expertise within project management, and insufficient budget allocations for gender-related activities. Issues that are often insufficiently understood and addressed include the socio-economic consequences of outmigration and how these and other factors affect women's workloads.
21. **Sustainability.** Practices are more likely to be sustained if the benefits they generate are well received, for example in the cases of backyard gardens, drudgery reducing technologies, or widely recognized, as in the case of awards used to acknowledge successful women entrepreneurs. Participatory approaches enhance

ownership and they help to ground gender in community structures. Integration of gender practices in local and national institutions is important, for example linking women's credit groups to the formal banking sector. Illiteracy is a factor that negatively affects the sustainability of women's groups and platforms.

22. **Lessons learned.** The synthesis has reviewed the gendered poverty impacts of common practices used by IFAD and others in the context of rural and agricultural development. There are a number of practices, such as rural finance, land and legal rights, markets and value chains, and off-farm employment, that can potentially make a significant contribution to addressing female poverty and IFAD is encouraged to review relevant good practices. Addressing issues of multiple exclusion and monitoring and reporting equal benefits for different groups of women is an area that requires more attention. The report summarizes the 14 key lessons from this synthesis in chapter VIII.

## **Conclusions**

23. IFAD has embarked on a new transformative agenda on GEWE. It has set itself ambitious targets to achieve real transformative gender impacts by addressing the root causes of gender inequalities through investments and policy engagement. At the moment there is no clear agreed definition or operationalization of the gender-transformative concept, in IFAD or elsewhere. The focus of this synthesis was therefore to systematically review the available evidence on gender practices and results with the aim of identifying transformative practices, as well as the key factors enabling or hindering GEWE in the context of IFAD interventions.
24. The review found that in many cases IFAD has addressed the root causes of gender inequality and women's powerlessness, in particular illiteracy, exclusion from access to resources and limited social capital. Participatory approaches and capacity-building, including group formation and functional skills training, had a clear impact on women's self-esteem, status and recognition, and in a number of cases challenged gender roles and power relations.
25. Most of the changes supported by IFAD interventions were at the individual level. They have successfully empowered women by providing access to resources or helping them acquire new skills, for example. Yet transformation requires change beyond individual capabilities. The review identified some interventions that successfully contributed to changing cultural norms and practices, but those rather intangible changes are often not well-documented and monitored. There were only very few examples where IFAD interventions enabled formal systemic change, for example on laws, policies and government capacities, and this is where a major gaps exists at the moment.
26. Project design has not always been explicit and intentional about the choices to approach GEWE. There is no doubt that IFAD interventions have created significant benefits for women. The provision of general infrastructure and in particular water has important gendered aspects and can address some root causes of gender inequality, such as time poverty. But these benefits must be intentionally built into the design and they must be consistently followed up and monitored. Furthermore, sustainable access to resources, in particular land, often also requires changes in laws and administrative practices that need to be considered at design.
27. Practices were not sufficiently documented to enable learning. For example, project documentation could be more explicit about definitions and meanings of empowerment, how this is assessed, and what results the project achieves – both in terms of empowering women and the broader positive impact this has. The analysis of gender inequalities and how projects are able to impact on these could be improved. The identification of good practices is not straightforward though since most interventions work with a combination of practices and are highly contextualized.

28. Measuring transformative change is an inherently complex and holistic endeavour and gender-transformative measurement systems must be equipped to embrace complexity and context-specificity, as well as the halting and often unpredictable nature of social change. There is a wealth of promising processes and practices for measuring meaningful relational change, social norm change or change in the less tangible aspects of recognition. Standard Results and Impact Management System (RIMS) indicators are not sufficient to capture those changes. Project monitoring and evaluation (M&E) thus will need to be more creative and include more diverse methods to capture social change.

## **Recommendations**

29. **Recommendation 1. Conceptualize and integrate the gender-transformative approach for use throughout the organization for IFAD10.** IFAD has set itself ambitious targets on gender-transformative interventions under IFAD10. It is therefore important to develop a shared understanding of the concept throughout the organization if gender-transformative practices are to be promoted and monitored in a consistent manner. The shared understanding of the concept will also underpin the highly satisfactory (6) transformative ratings at project design and closure that will feed into reporting under IFAD10. Harmonization of ratings approaches should also involve IOE.
30. **Recommendation 2. Develop explicit theories of change to underpin targeting strategies for different groups of women, together with indicators to monitor them at the point of design, and offer tailored interventions based on available good practices.** Theories of change are critical to linking design, implementation and monitoring of gendered targeting strategies. Specific targeting strategies are required to address the needs of different groups of women, that are more likely to be left behind, such as very poor women, landless women, single women, female-headed households, indigenous women and young women, together with good contextual analysis. Relying on a participatory approach will not be sufficient, rather explicit strategies have to be integrated into design and followed through during implementation, based on good gender analysis. The effectiveness of targeting will require further disaggregation of beneficiary data for monitoring purposes.
31. **Recommendation 3. Establish systematic M&E of disaggregated benefits and GEWE outcomes at corporate and project levels.** The revision of the RIMS framework provides an opportunity to improve gender-disaggregated performance indicators at output and outcome level. While some key performance indicators should be set at corporate level (e.g. indigenous women, young women), the main effort will be to improve the granularity (and quality) of indicators and data at project level. At the same time, projects should improve the documentation of GEWE results, in particular GEWE outcomes and impacts, using appropriate methodologies for measuring gender-transformative changes within a given context, such as case studies and participatory and qualitative research to complement standard M&E data.
32. **Recommendation 4. Report consistently on GEWE outcomes and impacts in GEWE evaluations and include sound contextual analysis to explain results (IOE).** Evaluation methods should place more emphasis on capturing GEWE results beyond beneficiary numbers and outputs, and should allow space for sufficient analysis of the contextual factors that have shaped those results. The adoption of a theory of change approach in IOE evaluations provides opportunities to integrate gendered results and assumptions. Beyond this, good gender or social analysis in evaluation also means that the required expertise must be available in every evaluation team.
33. **Recommendation 5. Replicate good practices covering the three GEWE policy objectives and strengthen working with men.** The synthesis has

identified a number of practices that are relevant for promoting GEWE objectives. The report showed that some practices are more common than others; some practices have shown good results while others need to be improved to become effective. The critical review and validation of practices at corporate and project level is part of the process of replication and scaling up. The process of reviewing both success and failure will have to continue beyond this report.

34. Based on this synthesis, we have identified the following guiding principles:
- (a) Practices that worked well, but are not yet common, should be promoted (e.g. value chains, marketing, off-farm employment).
  - (b) Labour-saving technologies and working with men are not common practices yet, but the available evidence suggests that they can be highly effective. Practices to influence men and traditional leaders and practices to address women's time poverty should be widely integrated into IFAD's interventions.
  - (c) Practices that are common, but so far have yielded mixed results, should be improved based on the available international practices. IFAD should critically review some commonly held beliefs and assumptions about gendered benefits and promote services that are better tailored to the strategic needs of women (e.g. inclusive rural finance, infrastructure, functional skills training).
  - (d) Some practices are highly relevant, but not yet effective or common (e.g. promotion of IGAs, land rights), often because they are meeting contextual limitations (social and cultural values, institutional and legal frameworks). For those, the assumptions and influencing factors (in their theories of change) that have been limiting their effectiveness and wider application need to be carefully reviewed. The wider application of those practices needs to be accompanied with adequate strategies to address the systemic issues that may limit their effectiveness.
  - (e) Policy engagement and scaling up successful GEWE practices are key to enabling transformative change. There are some good practices already, but they need to be more widely understood and applied within IFAD.
  - (f) Finally, it is the combination of practices that brings about transformative change. Therefore, IFAD interventions should be encouraged to use a range of different practices that more comprehensively address the complexity of issues and factors affecting GEWE.