



## SUSTAINABLE FOOD SECURITY FOR ALL BY 2020

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### SUMMARY NOTE

**Panel Discussion:** Empowering Low-Income Women  
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**Title:** Empowering Low-Income Women for Enhanced Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa

#### ***Women and Food Production: The Sub-Saharan African Context***

As the global concern for food security increases and translates into more innovative strategies, the role of women in fighting the current food crisis cannot be underestimated. Subsistence agriculture still dominates the working lives of more than half the world's women. In Africa, women produce 78 percent of the continent's food, including meat and staple grains, on subsistence and small land holdings with very limited access to production resources, land inclusive. In Uganda, women contribute over 80 percent of the total agricultural labor force with most of the time allocated to food production and processing.

For many decades, the women of Africa with very poor technologies have largely contributed to the sustenance of the continent. Their contribution to survival in most African governments is key and cannot be underestimated.

#### ***The Needs of Women Farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa***

The needs of women farmers revolve around their strategic and practical gender needs that demand both long-term and short-term solutions for improved performance in farming. Such needs include:

*Improved access to agricultural advisory services.* Agricultural extension, being male dominated, continues to target and benefit men much more than women in most developing countries. Even then, the focus of extension tends to be more on cash crops and larger enterprises that often underscore and leave out the needs of smaller farmers, particularly women, for advice on food production and food security concerns. This further marginalizes women's efforts to achieve efficient management of smaller livestock for sustainable livelihood.

*Improved access to rural financial services (credit/loans).* Women farmers, due to lack of collateral and limited scale of enterprises, have for long been disadvantaged in accessing credit and loans. The terms of access to rural loans tend to favor more commercial enterprises leaving out important aspects related to food production and household nutrition. The long distances involved in accessing rural financial service centers are prohibitive to rural women who have not only time constraints but also limited ability to afford rural transportation. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the rural financial agencies are more commonly urban based.

*Access to land and other productive resources.* Women's access and control over productive resources remains lacking in most sub-Saharan Africa. Legislation over land tenure systems needs to take into account the important role of women play in providing food for their families. Agricultural inputs have remained inaccessible to women, therefore perpetuating drudgery in their farming efforts.

*Poor market infrastructure, information, and facilities.* Low-income women have tended to be marginalized by distant and poor market facilities. Insufficient emphasis has been put on market facilities that attract the participation of women in marketing.

Moreover market information remains restricted to the literate as well as more urban-based farmers. Because of persistent low levels of literacy among low-income women, information regarding farming and particularly food security does not readily reach women farmers. Besides, most of the information packaging and dissemination channels are unsuitable for them.

*Lack of appropriate technologies.* Production among women has been predominantly labor intensive, most of the farm work being reliant on family and child labor. Agricultural research needs to focus more on technologies relevant and appropriate for women's enterprises, with more consideration put not only on relevance but also on affordability and accessibility of such technologies. In addition, the required technologies should be labor saving, yield enhancing, and environmentally friendly. Agroprocessing technologies are paramount, as these would help women add value to their agricultural products that fetch a higher price in addition to enhancing their livelihoods and that of their families.

*Training.* Women need to be targeted as important stakeholder groups for farmer training. Such training should be tailored to meet the gender specific needs of women and should further take into account women's reproductive roles related to child care and provision of food and care for their households. The fact that women are constrained by time due to domestic work needs to be taken into account when designing farmer-training programs.

### ***Redesigning Agricultural Programs to Meet the Needs of Women Farmers***

*Gender responsive agricultural and rural development policies.* As African economies undergo social and economic transition for enhanced food security, there is need for prioritization if women's empowerment generally but specifically in the agricultural sphere. As is widely acknowledged, women continue to be the majority the world's poor and yet responsible for producing most of the world's food. Agricultural policies and programs need to address issues related to the low status of women as well as their needs in order to improve their production capability.

*Participation and involvement of women in identification, design, implementation, and monitoring of agricultural programs.* Agricultural programs need to largely recognize women specific needs, abilities, and contributions as key stakeholders. This will facilitate the process of articulating resource requirements for addressing these needs.

In order to enable women participate better in alleviating the food crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa, they need to be involved as key participants in development planning of agricultural programs at all levels. In Uganda, the development process of the Plan for Modernization of Agriculture (PMA) took into account views of men and women farmers. This was the most appropriate way to ensure that women articulate their specific needs and constraints in attempts to modernize agriculture while enhancing food security.

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*Implications of HIV/AIDS for women farmers.* The increasing negative impact of HIV/AIDS on agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa has resulted into women's increased work burden as

well as increasing poverty status. The changing nature of rural households specifically the emergence of female-headed households, orphan-headed households, and the limited labor and time available for food production due to care of sick relatives and attendance of funeral ceremonies has rendered poor households even more vulnerable to food insecurity. This emergent situation which is likely to get worse in the coming years, calls for new approaches to planning food security interventions that take into account the realities posed by the scourge. It is paramount to reconsider the technology needs among the emergent labor force structure for production, processing, and postharvest handling of food crops.

*Improved access to market information and infrastructure.* Emphasis on the role of the market in creating income-generating opportunities for low-income women should be considered a key pillar in designing modern agricultural programs. Women need access to relevant market information that will enable them make meaningful enterprise selection. Market outlets need to be opened up within proximity of the rural communities in order to enable women avoid exploitation by middlemen.

*Gender disaggregated data in agriculture and rural development.* Recognition of rural women's economic potential needs to be adequately voiced on the development agenda in Sub-Saharan Africa. Women's contributions should be reflected in national statistics used for planning, guiding policy, and budgeting. The need for gender disaggregated statistics in agriculture and rural development needs to be articulated and capacity built to mainstream the use of such data, the ultimate goal being to enhance the capabilities of women in food production through gender targeting.

*Improved gender responsive policy for agricultural research and advisory services.* Agricultural research in the new millennium needs to be focused on the prevailing constraints identified by farmers and more specifically by women farmers for food production as well as improved nutrition levels. This will promote innovations in farmer-led and demand-driven research in order to address the concerns of increased productivity and production of food crops in a sustainable manner. Fast-maturing and high-yielding food crop varieties will greatly enhance the food security needs among poor communities.

Agricultural advisory needs for women farmers need to be better targeted and delivered. New approaches, including privatization of advisory services, should ensure that women's abilities to demand and pay for such services are addressed in order not to marginalize women further.

*Capacity enhancement for women farmers organizations.* Rural women's groups and associations need to be strengthened in the bid to realize more sustainable food security. The need for focused training and extension delivery to women groups will largely improve access to agricultural knowledge and information among farming women and communities.

## **Conclusion**

There is need for an intensive effort and emphasis on mainstreaming gender in agricultural programs. This will facilitate the entry of women as active decisionmakers on issues that relate to food security and income generation. The present debates on food security in Sub-Saharan Africa should focus more on the constraints faced by women as the major food producers. The food situation for Sub-Saharan Africa will be improved with more relevant technologies for poor farmers being developed and promoted, community participation outreach initiatives adopted, accessible advisory and rural financial services, and improved market information flow targeted to rural farming communities.

*Note: The views expressed in this summary note are those of the author and are not necessarily endorsed by or representative of IFPRI or of the cosponsoring or supporting organizations.*