

CHAPTER 5

Gender Equality Women's Empowerment for Rural Revitalization

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KEY FINDINGS

- Achieving gender equity and women's empowerment is of intrinsic value to women and girls and a key step toward achieving many Sustainable Development Goals and rural revitalization.
- Women and girls face a burden of time-consuming responsibilities, while controlling fewer resources and having less access to schooling, nonfarm jobs, and group membership, and less voice in governance and decisionmaking than men.
- Growth of nonagricultural jobs in many regions has led to the "feminization" of agriculture, with women taking on more farm-related responsibilities, often without greater resources.
- The *reach-benefit-empower* framework facilitates evaluation of how projects support women by ensuring their participation and that they receive benefits they value, and by strengthening their ability to make choices.
- Policies create conditions for successful projects, and should also be evaluated with the *reach-benefit-empower* lens. For example, policies to reduce women's domestic workload and to improve access to financial and agricultural services will facilitate empowerment.

- Policies to empower women can promote rural revitalization by supporting environmental sustainability, agricultural transformation, and development of nonfarm opportunities for men and women.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use a *reach-benefit-empower* framework to ensure that interventions move beyond nominal participation to real improvements in women's lives.
- Increase women's effective voice through participation in formal governance structures, from local to national, and increasing women's confidence to become politically involved.
- Improve data and evidence relevant to increasing equality, particularly sex-disaggregated data and impact evaluation of programs and policies for women's empowerment.
- Include men and boys when designing projects and policies for women to reduce backlash and encourage changes in gender norms.



Rural revitalization requires that all members of society be able to participate in and benefit from growth and transformation of rural areas. But women and girls face particular challenges because of gender differences in resources and responsibilities. Achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is of intrinsic value to women and girls. It is also a key step toward achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals, including eliminating poverty (SDG1), achieving zero hunger and malnutrition (SDG2), and ensuring good health and well-being for women and children (SDG3). Numerous studies have shown that when women control resources, their families, especially their children, enjoy better health and nutrition. Other studies have demonstrated that women's empowerment can improve agricultural productivity, dietary quality, and maternal and child nutrition.¹ These connections are especially evident in rural areas, reflecting the vital role that women play in agriculture, nutrition, and health.²

Despite SDG commitments to gender equality, women generally control fewer resources than their male counterparts and often have little say in how household income is used.³ Women's "triple burden" of productive, domestic, and community responsibilities creates

time constraints. The disadvantages that women face are passed on to girls, who often must help their mothers with domestic chores at the cost of their schooling. In societies where gender discrimination is entrenched, parents invest less in girls' health, nutrition, and education. Compared with young men of the same age, young rural women are more likely to be married, to have fewer years of schooling, and to own fewer assets. As a result, they are less likely to participate in the labor force or to obtain employment in high-wage sectors that are open to better-educated workers.⁴

The role of women and girls, and overcoming the constraints they face, is particularly important where men have migrated away from rural areas or moved out of agriculture. Historically, development has involved a process of structural transformation—a shift away from traditional agriculture as the manufacturing and services sectors become more important in the economy—that includes a reduction in employment in the agriculture sector as employment for both women and men expands in other sectors. Yet in many countries men move out of agriculture while women stay (or move out more slowly), and women's participation in agriculture consequently expands.⁵

This “feminization” of agriculture can create both opportunities and challenges for women. When remunerated, their increased involvement in agricultural work or in off-farm rural enterprises can empower women within their households and communities. However, if women are left with increased responsibilities in agriculture—without male labor, agricultural extension information, or recognized rights over land and agricultural assets, or without basic literacy and numeracy—they are unlikely to succeed. And if women continue to perform the bulk of unpaid work while men work in more lucrative jobs, gender gaps in wealth and labor burdens can widen.

How can the process of rural revitalization provide opportunities to empower women and girls? And how can empowering women and girls create sustainable rural communities? To answer these questions, we need to understand what we mean by women’s empowerment. “Empowerment” has been defined as a process by which people expand their ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in contexts in which this ability had been denied to them.⁶ The ability to exercise choice encompasses three dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. *Resources* include not only access but also future claims to material, human, and social resources. *Agency* is the capacity to act independently and to make choices, including processes of decisionmaking, negotiation, and even deception and manipulation. *Achievements* are well-being outcomes, such as good health and nutrition. Rural revitalization must therefore include opportunities for women and girls to increase access and rights to resources (land, water, technology, and other assets), increase their decisionmaking power, and increase their well-being. Education and group membership can contribute by building women’s confidence, social connections, and access to information.

To be sustainable, women’s empowerment requires changes in gender norms and in deep-seated attitudes that affect relationships between men and women. This means that any programming involving women and girls must also consider potential effects on men and on families. Norms do not change in isolation—attitudes of the community must also change. To be successful, programs must facilitate changes in the attitudes of not only family members but also community members.

THE CHALLENGES

Rural economic transformations are bringing about rapid changes in rural demographic structures. As rural economies transform by increasing agricultural value added per worker, fewer workers are needed on the farm and labor can move from agriculture to nonagricultural enterprises. The reallocation of labor from agriculture to nonagriculture may involve migration, especially by young men. These changes have led to the feminization of agriculture in some regions, with an increasing share of agricultural work done by women, as noted above. A recent study argues that women’s growing importance in agriculture in the Near East and North Africa, Central Asia, South Asia, and Latin America reflects a conjunction of factors: the diversification out of family farming induced by population growth and land fragmentation, the intensification of agricultural production (which can increase the need for female labor), the parallel growth of nonagricultural jobs, and changes in social and cultural norms that affect women’s and men’s mobility and livelihoods.⁷ In Africa south of the Sahara, women already make up a large proportion of the agricultural labor force; and even in Latin America, where agriculture is regarded as a man’s occupation, women’s involvement is increasing through wage work in nontraditional agricultural export enterprises.

Even as women’s involvement in agriculture increases, rural women continue to face constraints. Analysis of empowerment gaps in 13 countries shows, for example, that the biggest contributors to women’s disempowerment are lack of access and power to make decisions about credit, excessive workload, and lack of group membership.⁸ Women are less likely to own land or livestock, adopt new technologies, use credit or other financial services, or receive education or agricultural extension services—all of which are important for agriculture-based livelihoods.⁹ Women also face significant mobility constraints relative to men that restrict their participation in markets and groups and their access to health and other services.¹⁰ Constraints on women’s time resulting from their larger agricultural responsibilities are compounded in many rural areas by the time needed for fetching water and fuel for domestic use. Lack of clean water and sanitation also leads to increased diarrheal diseases that affect women’s health directly and add to their caregiving burden when other household members fall ill. Indoor cooking using traditional methods and low-quality fuels,

especially when ventilation is poor, increases the prevalence and severity of respiratory infections.¹¹

Governance structures may exacerbate gender gaps. Often governance structures—like farmers' associations, forest-user groups, or local government bodies—are dominated by men and do not take account of gender differences in needs and priorities, particularly for rural services such as agricultural extension and water supply. Even where women are represented, cultural norms or lack of education may prevent poor women from speaking in public, so their voices are not heard. This applies not only to local, regional, and national government representation but also to rural producer organizations, which are important providers of agricultural inputs and services.¹² In addition, poor governance of natural resources has led to environmental degradation. While this affects all rural residents, women and girls are particularly affected by degradation of water and forest resources because of their responsibilities for obtaining domestic water and fuel. Water-user associations, forest-user groups, and fishers' associations can play an important role in ensuring sustainable resource governance, but these organizations are also often dominated by men. Yet active involvement of women in the membership and leadership of forestry and fishers' organizations has been shown to improve natural resource governance and conservation outcomes, such as through broadening participation in rule setting and enforcement related to resource use.¹³ Women's active participation in natural resource management groups, either through all-women's groups or strong involvement of women in mixed groups, is associated with greater collaboration, solidarity, reciprocity, and conflict resolution.¹⁴

Another constraint that impedes efforts to close the gender gap is lack of data and knowledge on the linkages between gender equality and rural revitalization—in particular, a lack of sex-disaggregated data on key outcomes. Although data on labor force participation and wages are typically collected at an individual level, which allows comparisons between genders, information on women's and men's ownership of assets, agricultural enterprises, and the like is rarely available. Employment data disaggregated by sex and age are not consistently available—national-level demographic and health survey data, for example, generally focus on women of reproductive age, and may not include the men in respondents' households. Women's participation

in agriculture is also underreported because of perceptions that women do not farm or fish, even when they are active in many stages of production and processing. Data gaps may also result from poor understanding of the linkages among gender equality, women's empowerment, and rural transformation, and how these linkages may vary across the life-cycle. Finally, there are gaps in research on what programs and policies are effective in enhancing gender equality and empowering women in rural change.

REACH, BENEFIT, AND EMPOWER

A new *reach-benefit-empower* framework for assessing whether and how specific agricultural development investments empower women could serve to guide the design and implementation of programs and policies intended to stimulate rural revitalization by ensuring they promote women's empowerment. Originally developed to assess projects' gender approaches based on whether projects are designed to reach, benefit, or empower women, the framework can be expanded to assess how policies can empower women. The framework reflects how thinking about gender integration has evolved over time and draws on recent empirical evidence from past projects that integrated gender but often fell short in terms of benefiting and empowering women.¹⁵

REACH, BENEFIT, EMPOWER FOR PROGRAMS

A strategy focused on *reaching* women emphasizes engaging women in project activities and tracks progress in terms of participation—for example, measuring the number of women who attend meetings or receive training, the percentage of women in groups formed or supported by the project, or the percentage of women among those with access to extension or other services provided by the project. Some projects struggle from the outset with reaching women when they design groups, meetings, or trainings with men's needs in mind, choosing locations, times of day, and settings that are not culturally appropriate for women to attend or feasible given their schedules and workload. To ensure that women participate, projects often try to identify and alleviate gender-based constraints to participation—such as changing the time or place of meetings, forming women-only groups, or hiring women staff in the implementing organization or as lead farmers or extension agents. Projects

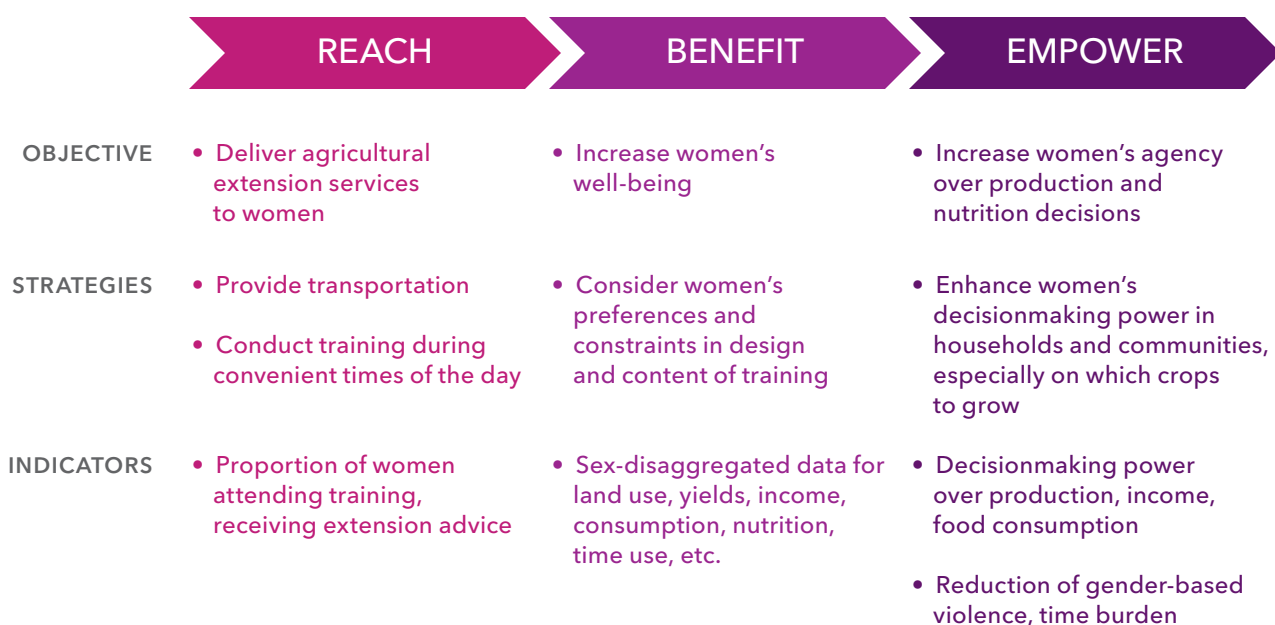
may also require that women make up a certain share of the participants (typically 30 percent).

While reaching women is a basic measure of whether a project offers gender-equitable opportunities for participation, the ability of men and women to benefit from these opportunities is not equivalent. If a project strategy aims to *benefit* women and girls, the project design, implementation, and evaluation should focus on ensuring that whatever outcomes the project is seeking—reduced hunger, increased income, greater resilience—go to them. This requires going beyond *reaching* women and girls to ensuring that the project delivers *benefits* that women and girls value. General programs to revitalize rural areas, such as improved roads or electricity, can benefit women and girls; but their particular needs and constraints must be addressed specifically to ensure that they do benefit from these investments. Because women and girls are often responsible for domestic work, provision of clean domestic water supplies and clean cooking fuels is particularly important. Sanitation programs, especially the provision of latrines or toilets in homes and safe, gendered latrines in schools, are helpful in a number of ways, from reducing the burden of caring for the sick to encouraging girls' schooling.

If a project strategy aims to empower women and girls, then it must go beyond reaching or benefiting them. *Empowering* women and girls means strengthening their ability to make strategic life choices and to put those choices into action—through control over resources, participation in decisionmaking, or individual agency in domains that women themselves value. Such empowerment is key to sustainable and inclusive rural revitalization. However, empowering women and girls does not mean focusing exclusively on them and ignoring men and boys. On the contrary, projects focused exclusively on women may fail to consider appropriate roles and benefits for men, thus risking backlash in the household or community. This not only endangers the sustainability of the project, but also misses an opportunity for changing gender norms.

Figure 1 illustrates the differences between reach, benefit, and empower for a nutrition-sensitive agricultural extension project. Reaching women would only require that women receive a one-way flow of information, which might be measured by the number of extension agent visits to women, the number of women attending extension meetings or field days, or the proportion of women who have heard a radio program. Benefiting would require that the content of the extension information be

FIGURE 1 Applying the reach-benefit-empower framework for a nutrition-sensitive agricultural extension program



Source: Authors.

useful to women, for example, that it be applicable to the crops or livestock for which women are responsible. Going beyond a one-way flow of information, participatory approaches such as farmer field schools that use group-based experiential learning have been shown to benefit women farmers through increases in crop and livestock production and agricultural incomes in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.¹⁶ Empowered women would not only receive agricultural extension services that increase their yields or income, but would also be able to influence what crops they can grow and the types of extension services they receive to ensure that the services meet their needs in both content and mode of delivery.

Measuring program success therefore requires that the indicators used to track progress are consistent with the program's reach, benefit, or empowerment goals and strategies. Participation counts indicate how well a program reached women, but not whether a program delivered benefits to or empowered women. To assess whether women benefited from a program, sex-disaggregated data on key outcomes of interest are necessary to compare the benefits that accrued to women versus men. However, even when women benefit, they are not necessarily empowered. To assess whether the program enhanced women's ability to make strategic life choices, programs must collect indicators on decisionmaking power and other aspects of empowerment, such as those captured in the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) or its project-level counterpart (pro-WEAI).¹⁷

To take another example, value chain interventions may reach women by including them in informational meetings, and often assume they will benefit if household incomes increase. However, the income from sales of produce often goes to men because women lack mobility and transportation to take produce to market. As a result, the extent to which women benefit from market development will depend on the degree of sharing and cooperation within the household. For example, a study in Ghana found that with the introduction of warehousing systems, produce that had been under women's control at the homestead was now under men's control, and women did not know how much grain their husbands had sold, or what happened to the income.¹⁸ Empowering women in value chains would involve identifying women's constraints and the ways that women can gain control over income. First steps toward empowerment often

include providing women with access to some form of financial account, whether through a bank, microfinance organization, or mobile money platform; ensuring that they can get produce to market, perhaps through local collection centers; and including women on contracts or warehousing receipt systems.

Rural electrification illustrates how programs can support both women and men in the process of rural transformation and contribute to women's empowerment as well as sustainable program outcomes. These programs would be more financially viable if women, as well as men, could use the energy for both productive and domestic uses. Electrification could also help reduce women's workload and provide lighting for girls' and boys' schooling. Ensuring that the appropriate investments are made requires that women's and girls' time is sufficiently valued—by women, their families, and communities.

REACH, BENEFIT, EMPOWER FOR POLICY

Adopting a *reach-benefit-empower* framework for projects is useful, but their impact will be sustainable only if women's empowerment is also supported at the policy level. For example, projects that create women's groups to save money or obtain access to microfinance loans will not have a sustainable impact if women cannot eventually "graduate" from microfinance to the formal banking system. Programs that give women microplots for agricultural production will not be sustainable if laws do not protect women's legal rights to land. Older women or women whose marriages have dissolved will not have secure rights to property if inheritance or divorce laws are inequitable.

Policies to reach, benefit, and empower rural women and girls can support rural revitalization because they support not only environmental sustainability and agricultural transformation, but also the development of more profitable nonfarm enterprises and better opportunities for women and men.

Relevant policies will go beyond those directly related to agriculture to address other constraints facing rural women. For example, policies that reduce the burden of women's family responsibilities—such as public support of childcare—will become more important as more women transition out of agriculture into the rural nonfarm sector. Social protection, such as health insurance, and better provision of primary healthcare could reduce the pressure on women as caregivers and help protect their assets. In

Bangladesh, for example, women's assets are often sold first to pay for unexpected health expenses.¹⁹

Policies that enable government services to *reach* women include those that improve women's access to infrastructure and information and that strengthen agricultural extension systems so that both men and women farmers are better served. This could include working through women's groups and hiring more male and female extension workers, as well as teaching extension workers how to better interact with male and female farmers.²⁰

Policies that *benefit* women and girls provide access to public services that women and girls need (such as water supply and sanitation) or attempt to redress discrimination in schooling, access to the labor market, and access to financial services. A very successful example is the female secondary-school stipend program in Bangladesh, introduced in 1994 to improve rural girls' education. The program provided free secondary education and a cash stipend for eligible girls residing in rural areas. A study of the program's long-term impact found that it increased years of schooling for female students by 0.6 to 1.2 years, and that girls exposed to the program had lower desired and actual fertility.²¹ This better-educated female workforce was more likely to be employed in the formal sector (like the country's garment industry) and less likely to work in the agriculture or informal sector. Stipend-eligible women also married more-educated husbands who had better occupations and who were closer to them in age. The children of eligible women were taller and heavier for their age. These findings suggest that government policies and programs to close gender gaps in schooling can have far-reaching effects later in life and into the next generation.

Policies and institutions that give women greater voice in governance and improve gender equality not only *empower* women and girls but also lay the foundation for sustainable rural revitalization. For example, the reform of the Ethiopia Family Code and its community-based land registration program set the stage for progress in gender equality in Ethiopia.²² The revision of the country's marriage laws to give women a claim to family assets in the case of divorce or death helped increase investments in girls' schooling: mothers who perceived that they would receive an equal share of assets in case of divorce invested more in their daughters' schooling than those who expected a smaller share.²³ But policy reform alone

is not sufficient to achieve women's empowerment—policies to support women must be complemented by activities that raise women's awareness of their rights and how to claim them as well as efforts to increase their participation in governance.

Such efforts, like quotas for women in leadership, show promise for improving the responsiveness of these institutions to women's needs and making sure that women's priorities are reflected in policymaking. For example, in India, after the passage of the Panchayati Raj Act requiring that 30 percent of representatives in local governments be women, villages with women leaders were found to have more publicly provided goods related to women's priorities, such as water supply and education. However, quotas for women in government bodies are insufficient to ensure gender-equitable service delivery without concomitant programs to build women's active participation and strengthen the capacity of service providers to work with women.²⁴ Quotas could be interpreted as ceilings for women, and having many visible women in the higher echelons of government does not necessarily mean that women have a voice at the grassroots level. It is also important to boost women's confidence to speak up and become more politically involved at the local level, such as through women's organizations like India's self-help groups.²⁵

FROM COMMITMENT TO REALITY

Commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment is growing at the international and national level, but translating this commitment into reality is not straightforward. No single blueprint exists, because gender issues, and the constraints and opportunities that women and girls face, depend on the context. However, reforms that put greater resources under women's control, reduce their workloads, and provide greater space for women's effective voice in governance structures are important, and should be coupled with improved data systems and impact assessments to document changes in empowerment and the distribution of benefits. These reforms generally require going beyond top-down interventions. Formulating, implementing, and monitoring both programs and policies through the *reach-benefit-empower* lens can help assure that women's needs are met and that women have greater capacity to contribute to rural revitalization.

A woman in traditional headwrap and patterned clothing, holding a small object, with a tree in the background.

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