

# GENDER AND RURAL TRANSFORMATION

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PIM SYNTHESIS BRIEF

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Rural transformation is central to the broader structural transformation process taking place in developing countries — fueled by the globalization of value chains, changing food systems, new technologies, conflict and displacement, and climate change, among other factors. Rural transformation refers to the process whereby rural economies diversify into nonfarm activities, agriculture becomes more capital-intensive and commercially oriented, and linkages with neighboring towns and cities grow and deepen (Berdegúe, Rosada, and Bebbington 2014). It can bring about fundamental changes in the way businesses and households organize, such as the commercialization and diversification of agricultural production; increased agricultural productivity; migration; and the emergence of a broader set of rural livelihood activities.

Analysis of rural transformation requires attention to gender, as men's and women's participation in rural transformation and ability to benefit from it is shaped by their different access to and control over resources, by often inequitable access to employment opportunities, and by norms that govern their access to livelihood opportunities in their communities and beyond. At the same time, rural transformation has the potential to change harmful gender norms and empower women.

This brief draws on research conducted under [Flagship 6 “Cross-Cutting Gender Research and Coordination”](#) of the CGIAR's Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets (PIM) led by IFPRI, including insights from Doss et al. (2020). It illustrates how the processes of rural transformation may influence women's and men's labor, access to resources, and broader gender relations and norms.

## KEY MESSAGES

- ▶ Analysis of rural transformation requires attention to gender, including women's labor market opportunities, access to resources, and degree of empowerment.
- ▶ Women need both resources and the ability to exercise agency to share in any benefits of rural transformation.
- ▶ Labor patterns are changing for both women and men, but women generally face greater barriers to accessing livelihood opportunities.
- ▶ The rural outmigration of men may provide new opportunities for women, but may also increase their work burdens and responsibilities without providing necessary resources.
- ▶ Even where women and men work together and perform the same tasks, the gender wage gap in agriculture favors men.
- ▶ As women become more engaged in paid labor, the question of who does the unpaid domestic and care work remains. Is women's work burden increasing?
- ▶ Important gender gaps in land ownership, access to inputs, and management and control over outputs remain. Women's lack of access to extension leads to gender gaps in information about new technologies and how women adopt those.
- ▶ Patriarchal gender norms are a key underlying constraint to women's ability to take advantage of new opportunities arising from rural transformation. Breaking harmful norms is challenging, but research reveals promising approaches.

## Changing labor patterns for rural women and men

**Women form a critical part of agriculture and rural nonfarm businesses.** They make up 43 percent of the agricultural labor force of developing countries and participate as farmers, entrepreneurs, and employees in both farm and nonfarm businesses (FAO 2011). There is considerable regional variation in women's labor patterns, but women everywhere face barriers and constraints to participation that men do not experience in the same way. Women's jobs are also often qualitatively different — being more likely to be part-time, seasonal, or low-paying. And women may also confront inequitable pay structures, harassment, and demands that they perform unpaid care work that competes with their ability to generate income.

**Rural transformation is changing the gendered patterns of labor.** Overall, we see a declining proportion of the labor force working in agriculture, with differing patterns for women and men. Within agriculture, individuals are shifting between being self-employed farmers, contributing family workers, and agricultural wage workers. Evidence from Ghana over the last 20 years shows that the share of women working as contributing family workers decreased significantly (from 42 to 34 percent). Men increased participation in wage employment, while women increased participation in nonfarm self-employment (Lambrecht et al. 2018).

**As rural households diversify into off-farm work, labor patterns are shifting on smallholder farms.** When a family member migrates, those who remain on the farm often adjust their time allocations for different activities. In Nepal, as men migrate, women take on new responsibilities. They shift from being contributing family workers to primary farmers — but do not take up more lucrative farm activities such as growing cash crops and rearing livestock. Instead, they continue to grow staple grain crops, mostly for home consumption. But men who remain withdraw labor from nonfarm work without significantly increasing their labor supply in agriculture (Slavchevska et al. 2020a). Similarly, in Ethiopia, male out-migration increases women's labor allocations to agricultural activities — though without increasing their decision-making in agriculture (Ramos et al. 2020). And in Kyrgyzstan, reductions in income that spur (predominately male) migration boost hours of total employment (and reduce hours of home production and leisure) for women who remain, with more muted impacts on men who remain

(Kosec, Song, and Holtemeyer 2020). Thus, increased market opportunities may raise women's overall work burden.



**Women also take up new opportunities off the farm but are often paid less than men.** For example, in Papua New Guinea, women's enterprises are less lucrative than men's or those managed jointly (Schmidt, Mueller, and Rosenbach 2020). In Myanmar, women take on local or distant manufacturing jobs out of necessity, but this can lower rather than raise household welfare, as there are poor substitutes for women's household production (Mueller, Schmidt, and Kirkleeng 2020). Gender-disaggregated data from Bangladesh reveal strong gender segmentation in production of jute, and a strong and persistent gender gap in wages for casual laborers that has worsened rather than improved over time (de Brauw, Kramer, and Murphy 2019). Norms that allow men to disrespect and harass women may also limit women's options. Women agricultural workers in Morocco often self-select to work in women-only groups to avoid harassment, even though this leads to accepting lower wages (Najjar et al. 2018).

**As some women shift more labor to agriculture, the question remains as to who will perform the unpaid domestic work they had been doing.** This burden may shift to other women in the household. Women workers may also do a "double shift," or child — disproportionately girls' — labor may be increasingly employed, possibly to the detriment of schooling. Alternately, less domestic work may be done — possibly through investments in laborsaving technologies that reduce drudgery and may induce men to share more heavily in this domestic work.



## Access to resources

**Access to resources, including land, water, credit, key inputs, and rural services, shapes how men and women participate in and benefit from rural transformation.** Kabeer's (1999) conceptual framework defines women's empowerment as a dynamic process of women acquiring the ability to make choices. The framework emphasizes that a woman needs both resources and the ability to exercise her agency to attain her goals. Rural transformation is likely to most benefit those with both resources and agency to use them.

**Women have less access than men to land and other resources needed to participate in rural transformation** (Ragasa et al. 2012; Peterman, Behrman, and Quisumbing 2014; Doss et al. 2015; Kieran et al. 2015). In Ethiopia, Kosec et al. (2018) find that household heads plan to give sons 60 per cent more land than daughters, and that this can reduce their opportunities to work in agriculture. In a study of Ghana, Lambrecht et al. (2018) find that the gender gap in cropping patterns has been closing over the past 20 years, but the gender gap in terms of land area owned has increased. Women further lag behind men in terms of decision-making about agricultural production and control over agricultural outputs (Slavchevska et al. 2020b).

**Commercialization of agriculture and government policies often put additional pressure on women's access to land.** In Malawi, a resettlement program that otherwise improved households' access to land, tenure security, and food security jeopardized land rights of women in male-headed households as matrilineal customs were abandoned in new villages (Mueller et al. 2014). Women are rarely compensated for losses of land resulting from government policies or commercialization projects; this is often because their involvement in agriculture is considered an "interest" rather than a "right" — and customary laws are ignored (Doss and Meinzen-Dick 2018).

**Women also tend to have less access to and control over irrigation.** While a study from Egypt shows that women are more engaged in irrigation than often assumed, it also highlights that access to resources such as land, education, training, and institutional support are critical factors for enabling women to access and derive benefits from irrigation technologies — which women often lack (Najjar, Baruah, and Garhi 2019).

**Extension services continue to be targeted at men.** In many contexts, women are seen as contributing family workers, or helpers, on the farm. Their engagement in agriculture as workers and primary farmers is often underestimated (Najjar, Baruah, and Garhi 2019; Twyman, García, and Muriel 2015). This can mean that policies and programs are less likely to reach or benefit women. In Ethiopia, decentralizing service delivery — a reform thought to "bring policymaking closer to the people" — increases both men's and women's access to extension services, but men benefit more on some measures of access (Kosec, Song, and Zhao 2020). Farnworth et al. (2018) and Balasubramanya (2019) underscore how women's lack of access to extension leads to gender gaps in information about new technologies, thus women continue to rely on technologies that require small investments but also yield low profits (Kawarazuka and Prain 2019).

## Gender norms and empowerment

**Patriarchal gender norms are a key barrier to women taking advantage of opportunities arising from rural transformation.** Even when women provide most of the labor in milk processing and livestock rearing, they may not own livestock and may have limited decision-making power — as in the case of South Jordan (Najjar, Baruah, and Al-Jawhari 2019). Women may also self-select into poorly paid opportunities to avoid gender-based harassment (Najjar et al. 2018). Breaking down norms that allow such imbalances to persist is critical for empowering women.



**Men's outmigration may create space for women to engage in agricultural management** (Padmaja et al. 2019). This includes not only primary agricultural production, but also marketing of agricultural products, negotiating labor contracts, supervising hired male labor, and interacting with extension and municipality agents. For some women, men's absence translates into more decision-making power, freedom of movement, and financial freedom (Farnworth et al. 2019).

**But breaking down gendered perceptions and biases is challenging.** Ramos et al. (2020) find muted effects of migration in Ethiopia on women's ability to engage in decision-making in agriculture; cultural norms prevent women from being seen as decision-makers, even in the absence of men. De Brauw, Kramer, and Murphy (2019) similarly find that male outmigration does not predict women's empowerment in agriculture, suggesting that hurdles remain to women exercising agency even when they have resources. Kosec et al. (2019) underscore how increases in support for women's labor force participation often come without increases in support from men for women's involvement in household and community decision-making — possibly stoking intrahousehold tensions. And Colfer, Ihalainen, and Monterroso (2020) provide an example of rural transformation introducing gender biases in Indonesia; while relatively egalitarian gender norms previously prevailed, the government and oil palm industry officials assumed male household heads were primary decision-makers, excluding women from negotiations over land and contracts.

**There are some promising approaches to break down harmful norms and empower women.** One is to use gender transformative approaches to engage explicitly with norms. A project in Uganda encouraged couples to register at least one of their sugarcane blocks in the wife's name. The result was significant increases in women's involvement in the value chain and in women's access to bank accounts, as these were a prerequisite for having a block registered in one's name (Ambler et al. 2018).

**Raising aspirations may be another way to change norms.** In Kyrgyzstan, raising women's aspirations increases their involvement in household decision-making and brings about more egalitarian gender attitudes among both women and men (Kosec et al. 2018). However, women's aspirations depend critically on supportive public investments in rural areas, and can be reduced by economic setbacks like floods (Kosec and Mo 2017; Kosec and Khan 2016).

**Changing the modalities of service delivery can also help empower women farmers.** In Uganda, providing extension information directly to women, as opposed to men or both jointly, increases their knowledge about and adoption of recommended maize management practices, and improves their role in agricultural decision-making. Further, extension information delivered by women increases women's individual decision-making and reduces men's dominance in agriculture, potentially creating opportunities for greater involvement of women (Lecoutere, Spielman, and Van Campenhout 2019).



## Setting research priorities

The linkages between rural transformation and gendered labor patterns, access to resources, and social norms are complex. Several important insights emerge from PIM's work. Rural transformation is changing gendered patterns of labor. However, evidence gaps remain on whether and how rural transformation affects gendered access to resources, social norms, and women's empowerment.

It is critical to look at the existing institutional framework to understand the gendered impacts of rural transformation. **Social norms** emerge as a key factor. These include norms around women's paid employment and behavior outside the household, perceptions of what women can and should do, expectations of women's unpaid work within the home, and attitudes toward violence against women and harassment.

**Governments and industries are key in shaping the opportunity spaces for both men and women.** Gender-blind policies and practices in the public and private sectors may not only fail to advance the empowerment of women and girls, but may actually fuel harmful gender biases.



While research conducted under Flagship 6 (Cross-Cutting Gender Research and Coordination) of the CGIAR's Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets has made significant steps toward providing insight around the gendered impacts of rural transformation on labor patterns, resources, and gender norms, important knowledge gaps remain.

First, **there is a need to document the changes in labor patterns**, considering the diversity of rural livelihoods and that these changes may differ for men and women of different ages and socioeconomic status. These include changes both on the extensive margins, with people moving into and out of agriculture, and on the intensive margins, with people working more hours.

Second, further evidence is needed on **what factors enable women to effectively participate in rural transformation**; for example, what is the role of laborsaving technologies in this process?

Third, as agriculture becomes more commercially oriented and integrated in the global markets in the process of rural transformation, **how are gendered labor patterns, resources, and norms shifting?** To start building the evidence base on the issue, PIM recently co-funded several research projects from diverse value chains and regions.

Finally, we need to systematize the growing evidence around the impacts of various rural transformation drivers on gender issues to understand **under what conditions rural transformation could be conducive to gender equitable outcomes**.

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