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# Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities for Agricultural Food Security Programs to Promote Women's Economic Empowerment

**By Jemimah Njuki**

Opportunities for the economic empowerment of women in agriculture are enormous. Across Africa for example, 68% of economically active women are in agriculture. With women playing a major role in agriculture, food systems have the potential of promoting economic growth and improving nutrition and health while being a mechanism for women's empowerment and for achieving gender equality. Shaping food systems so they became gender transformative requires a combination of improved knowledge, sound policies, regulations, and investments across the production-to-consumption continuum.

In the agriculture sector, gender equality initiatives tend to aim for the economic empowerment of women by promoting access to and control

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over assets (such as land, improved technology, training or credit) that will contribute to short-term productivity gains. This is problematic as it focuses on identifying and closing “gender gaps,” without necessarily identifying or addressing the underlying causes of the differences and without attention to the way gender inequality becomes institutionalized in norms, organizations and rules of distribution including the market.

Moving forward towards real empowerment of women in the sector requires a rethinking of the role of women as producers and consumers, a moving away from “what are women’s contributions in agriculture” toward “how food and agricultural systems contribute to the process of women’s empowerment”, and “how these systems are changing or should change to create an enabling environment”. From trying to “fix” women, to fixing the agriculture and food system.

There are four critical things we can do to transform food systems so that they are equitable, inclusive and lead to the empowerment of women.

**Deepening access to and control over resources by women:** Research shows that women’s ownership of resources has a bearing on their bargaining power and their economic empowerment. Major roadblocks that women face include limited access, control, or ownership of vital assets, such as land, housing, capital, agricultural inputs, and transportation, generating a host of economic challenges. Without land, women have less say over what gets planted, and what gets sold and how the income is used. It also restricts women’s ability to make needed capital improvements, as they do not possess collateral to obtain credit. In developing countries women are 20% less likely than men to have an account at a formal financial institution and yet having a bank account is critical to women managing their finances. Women also face considerable setbacks securing long-term, decent wages at equal pay rates. This is mainly due to women’s greater

burden of unpaid work caring for children and households. Agriculture and associated sectors -where a majority of women in Africa, Asia and most of Latin America derive their livelihoods- provides an opportunity to increase women’s economic empowerment and to ensure that women can translate their economic means to better lives for themselves and their families. Gender transformative financing models, new models of marketing such sourcing from women owned farms, group marketing and other forms of collective action, and the growth of supermarkets are all having significant impact with potential for women’s economic empowerment.

### **Build women’s leadership in agriculture:**

Whether it’s the public or private sector, sectors that are led by inclusive leadership teams make better decisions that deliver better results. Women bring the skills, different perspectives and structural and cultural difference to drive effective solutions. Women play significant roles in the agriculture sector, contributing over 40% of the agriculture labour in food production, and yet their voices are often not heard at various levels, in farmers organizations, in co-operatives, in research and in major national, continental and global conversations. For example in a country like Ethiopia, where 85% of the population depends on agriculture and where cooperatives and where cooperatives are critical for accessing resources, only 20% of cooperative members are women and even fewer are found in management positions. Despite this, women have often used collective action to advance their agenda and empower their membership. Associations such as SEWA and CARE Village and Savings Associations offer important lessons on how to build women’s leadership in the agricultural sector. These efforts will also require boosting the numbers of women researchers through targeted programs. Only 25% of agricultural researchers in Africa for example are women, and only 17% are in research leadership.



**Addressing social norms and masculinities:** In the past quarter century, we have seen remarkable gains for women. But even with this progress, significant gender disparities are still evident: intra-household allocations of time, responsibilities, and power are unequally distributed among men and women. Almost everywhere, men remain the primary income earners in their households, as well as the main decision makers. Behind the progress toward gender equality and persistent gender gaps lies an almost universal set of factors embedded in social and gender norms. Gender and social norms define women's and men's roles and dictate responsibilities in households, markets, and public life in their communities. Social norms play a central role in the relation between people's agency and the opportunities that they have. Social norms can hinder women's capacity to take advantage of available opportunities, for example taking up economic activities, engaging in markets, or even participating in leadership. Social norms however change and there have been approaches that have worked in changing norms, including engaging men and boys, behaviour change communication, engagement of cultural leaders who are often custodians of customary norms, technology and education. What is clear is that to unleash the potential of women, a systematic strategy for addressing gender and social norms across cultures, geographies and scale is required.

**Changing structures and institutions:** Gender and social norms often interlock with civic institutions, the institutions of the state, the market, and intra-household bargaining dynamics to shape and sometimes reinforce the gender inequities of power—and impact the choices and freedom of women and girls. These structural inequalities can persist even in the face of women's individual agency. While the traditional emphasis on economically “empowering” women exclusively through micro-loans or grants, training programmes or networking and mentorship, and while these interventions are important (and comparatively easy to implement), they are

limited in their power to shape broader institutions. We need to turn our attention to the larger environment where economic opportunities unfold – examine and correct pervasive gender biases in organisations and alter service provision so that it is not biased against women. The assumption that services, especially productive ones, are gender neutral and not gender biased is wrong, but so far this has been largely overlooked in both development research and practice.



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# MEDA Greater Rural Opportunities for Women Learning Event

By Mira Maude Chouinard

MEDA is wrapping up the Greater Rural Opportunities for Women (GROW) project, a women's economic empowerment (WEE) and food security initiative in Northern Ghana, funded by Global Affairs Canada. Program interventions included supporting women farmers to access market information, strengthening input supply chains, connecting farmers with higher value markets and catalyzing greater financial inclusion. MEDA is developing a series of learning documents on financial inclusion (village savings and loan associations (VSLAs), crop insurance and technical assistance to financial institutions), food security, conservation agriculture, technology transfer, the female sales agent model and WEE.

To celebrate GROW's learnings, MEDA held a knowledge-sharing event in Ottawa on November 21, 2018 to highlight key successes and lessons learned around WEE, food security and inclusive markets. Participants from organizations including Global Affairs Canada, the Aga Khan Foundation, SOCODEVI, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), CARE Canada and Co-operative Development Foundation of Canada (CDF Canada) attended the event.

The first panel discussed "Inclusive Markets & WEE," and MEDA staff members Jennifer Denomy (Technical Director, Vulnerable Populations) and Jennifer King (Senior Project Manager, Global Programs) presented their findings on models that made markets more inclusive for women in the GROW project: The Technology Fund and The Women Sales Agents Model, respectively.

The second panel focused on "Food Security & WEE" and featured three projects that increased

food production and consumption, and facilitated the transition from subsistence to market-oriented agriculture while recognizing women's contributions to the economy. Panelists included: Pierre Kadet (Senior Manager, Food Security and Resilience to Climate Change from CARE Canada) who presented on the findings of the Food Sufficiency for Farmers (FSF) project in Ethiopia; Frewengel Wolde-Michael (Country Director from CDF Canada) who presented on findings of the Food Security through Co-operatives, Northern Ghana (FOSTERING) project in Northern Ghana; and myself, Mira Maude Chouinard (Project Manager in the West Africa/MENA region at MEDA).



*Jennifer Denomy of MEDA sharing some of the technologies now being used by women in Northern Ghana.*



*Mira Maude Chouinard of MEDA, accompanied by Pierre Kadet of CARE Canada and Frewengel Wolde-Michael of CDF Canada.*



Key learnings of the event were numerous. The evolution of the [women lead farmer model](#) to the [women sales agents model](#) was an important one. Women lead farmers in GROW trained others in their communities on good agronomic practices, but frequently lacked entrepreneurial skills necessary to link other farmers to markets. Therefore, the sales agent role was created for the more entrepreneurial women farmers, who began buying and aggregating soy from other women and selling it to processors and markets.

Technology was also identified as a catalyst for women's inclusion in the market, but without laying the groundwork for WEE, technology would not have the same impact.

The second panel highlighted the need to address all dimensions of food security (availability, access, utilization and stability) for food insecure households. All three projects captured the need to increase agricultural productivity and diversify crop production, to increase financial inclusion (through VSLAs or credit unions), to create an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs to increase their access to markets, to provide training on improved nutrition practices and to increase climate resilience via appropriate agronomic practices, community-based early warning committees and/or crop insurance. Engagement with men and government bodies were also emphasized as key lessons learned for WEE and food security, to increase women's decision-making power, access to resources including land, and for nutrition-sensitization.

The GROW knowledge-sharing event was ultimately very successful in its aim of showcasing different models to increase women's economic opportunities and economic empowerment in developing country contexts.

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**The GrOW Research Series** brings together scholarly research on women's economic empowerment and growth in low-income countries, and provides a conceptual and empirical basis for policy-making. It is also the official research platform for the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) program. This series is housed at the Institute for the Study of International Development (ISID) at McGill University in Montreal.

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