

# *Promoting Sustainability: Nurturing Agriculture through Gender Equity and Family-Responsive Farming Systems*

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## ABSTRACT

Family farming is intricately tied to both national and global food security, standing out as the predominant form of agriculture in developing and developed countries alike. Despite facing limitations in access to productive resources such as agricultural inputs and support, family farmers exhibit remarkable land management skills, sustaining high levels of productivity. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines family farming as encompassing family-based agricultural activities, predominantly reliant on family labor, including both women and men, across agriculture, forestry, fisheries, pastoral, and aquaculture production. Gender dynamics play a crucial role in the context of family farming. Socially assigned roles influence resource distribution, wealth, and decision-making within families and public life. Women from poor households play vital roles in income-generating activities, often being the primary or sole source of household livelihoods. Family farming

integrates environmental sustainability, poverty reduction, and various other SDGs, showcasing its role in holistic sustainable development. FAO plays a crucial role in supporting family farmers. It aims to enhance access to natural resources, decent employment, and social protection through multi-sectoral rural development policies. FAO promotes sustainable practices, including integrated pest management, organic agricultural techniques, and the conservation of plant and animal genetic resources. Recognizing its significance and implementing targeted policy interventions are imperative to unlock the full potential of family farming in shaping a sustainable and equitable future.

## INTRODUCTION

Family farming is inextricably linked to national and global food security. Both in developing and developed countries, family farming is the predominant form of agriculture in the food production sector. FAO views family farming as all family-based agricultural activities which are linked to several areas of rural development. Family farming is a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production which is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labour, including both women's and men's.

Gender relates to socially assigned roles and behaviours attributable to men and women, it refers to the social meaning of biological sex differences. Gender roles are roles that are played by both women and men and which are not determined by biological factors but by the socioeconomic and cultural environment or situation. Gender affects the distribution of resources, wealth, work, decision-making, political power as well as the enjoyment of rights and entitlements within the family and in public life (Welch *et al.* 2000). Women from poor households engage in a variety of income-generating and expenditure-saving activities. In some cases, these activities supplement the contribution by males while in others they are the primary or the sole source of household livelihoods (Kabeer 2003). Women are twice as likely as men to be involved in agriculture related activities

(Odame *et al.* 2002). Whatever the culturally ideal position of men and women may be, major economic and social transformations taking place in the globalized world are rapidly and substantially changing household formations and patterns of obligations (Jiggins 1986). According to Fernando (1998), activities, resources and opportunities of people are significantly influenced by gender—that is, by the socio-economic and cultural dimension of being male or female. Moreover, different types of activities and tasks are generally allocated to women and men within the family in terms of subsistence production and production for the market. In most societies, reproductive tasks or tasks related to child bearing and care and maintenance of the household (cooking, fetching water and firewood) are assigned to women. In addition, women also manage community resources while men participate in formal community politics (Fernando 1998). Development policies and programmes in most developing countries continue to contain assumptions regarding gender roles that place women in stereotyped work such as housewives and secretaries (Bhatta 2001). In order to enable women to actively participate in the sustainable development process, there is a great need to promote changes in policies, laws, structures and attitudes and development programmes.

## **Strengthening Family Farming**

To realize the full potential of family farmers in eradicating hunger and ensuring food security, an enabling policy environment is necessary. This includes greater recognition of their multiple contributions, as well as an acknowledgment and reflection of these in national dialogues and policies.

At the national level, there are a number of factors that are key for a successful development of family farming, such as: agro-ecological conditions and territorial characteristics; access to markets; access to land and natural resources; access to technology and extension services; access to finance; demographic, economic and socio-cultural conditions and availability of specialized education among others. Targeted agricultural, environmental and social policy interventions in support of family farmers are necessary in order to make tangible changes and sustainable improvements.

FAO is helping family farmers enhance access to natural resources, decent employment and social protection through multi-sectoral rural development policy support and community development. FAO is also offering support in natural resource management and adaptation and resilience to climate change by promoting integrated pest management, organic agricultural techniques, conservation of plant and animal genetic resources, and proactive drought risk management. To ensure women, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups are not left behind, FAO is supporting inclusive rural and community development policies, access to value chains and the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT).

## **Gender roles and labour division in farming systems**

### **Main crop production**

Men and women often assume different tasks in the cultivation of the same crop or may cultivate different crops. For example, men do the land preparation, while women sow and weed. This can also vary between crops or plots, depending on who manages and controls them. Women may contribute a significant amount of labour in male-headed households or in the cultivation of crops controlled by men, but this contribution often lacks recognition

### **Multiple and seasonal activities in the farming system**

Activities related to staple and marketable crops while obscuring the other activities women and/or men carry out in addition. These can be having a home garden, using forests, seed selection and conservation, post-harvest storage, marketing or food processing. Interventions in main crops can lead to positive or negative side effects for the other activities, e.g. conservation agriculture reduces available straw for livestock or a tractor reduces labour input, thus freeing time for other activities. Men's and women's activities vary throughout the year, and no snapshot captures the whole range of activities pursued in a year. It is important to be aware of and explore these seasonal variations to understand the labour constraints women and men experience at specific times of the year.

### **Sustainable rice production systems and family farmers**

More than a billion people depend on rice production for their livelihoods and more than 3.5 billion people depend on rice for at least 20 percent of their daily calories. Family farms are the main source of rice production – especially in Asia. In rice production systems,

food security and prosperity have long been associated with the availability and diversity of both rice and fish. Traditional rice-fish systems and modern adaptations of these systems produce higher yields of rice along with fish production. In addition, since use of agricultural chemicals is minimized, wild biodiversity can flourish. Rice fields therefore harbour a rich level of biodiversity – from birds to crabs to insects – and are considered to be one of the most successful tropical rainfed systems.

### Livestock

Depending on the regional context and animal type, men as well as women are livestock owners, managers or perform certain tasks. Women typically own and raise fewer large livestock than men but rather take care of small stock like pigs, sheep and poultry. Gender norms often influence who handles and owns which type of animal. Although they do not own the livestock, women may assume most of the responsibilities for animals kept at the homestead, which can include the procurement of fodder for animals, the processing and marketing of livestock products.

### CONSTRAINTS OF GENDER ROLE IN AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES

- Shortage of Land
- Workload of Women Activities
- Lack of Infrastructure
- Lack of Access to Extension Services
- Cultural Factor

### CONCLUSION

Family farming is crucial for global food security and rural development, with both men

and women contributing significantly. Gender roles shape the division of labour, as women often handle a large share of agricultural tasks, either supplementing men's contributions or serving as primary providers. However, their work frequently goes unrecognized, particularly in subsistence farming and informal labour. To support family farming, especially in developing regions, a supportive policy environment is essential. This includes improved access to land, markets, technology, and finance, as well as tailored education and extension services. FAO's initiatives promote resilience and sustainability through integrated pest management, climate adaptation, and inclusive policies that encourage gender equality. Recognizing the diverse roles and seasonal activities of both men and women within farming systems enables more effective, sustainable practices, contributing to the fight against hunger and poverty.

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