

Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture IICA

Policies to strengthen the contribution of women to agriculture and food security

Executive Summary

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Our commitment to the rural women of the Americas

The decision to hold the international forum *Women in Agriculture: the contribution of women to agriculture and food security in the Americas* is in line with the commitment made by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) to support the women who live and work in the rural areas of our member countries.

We are holding this forum within the framework of what has been declared the Inter-American Year of Women by the Organization of American States (OAS), and on the same day we are celebrating the 68th anniversary of the founding of our Institute. As we approach 70 years of institutional life, we recognize that we are indebted to the rural women of the Americas, who produce half of all the food consumed at home, are one of the driving forces behind the economy of rural territories and share equal responsibility for the development, stability and survival of their families... all the while facing gender inequality and the fact that their contributions are almost completely left out of national economic statistics.

We want to contribute to the development of a common agenda for cooperation between IICA and the member countries, aimed at promoting the development of rural women and families and at strengthening their contribution to agriculture and food security.

With this in mind, at this forum we will submit for discussion nine proposed policies which, together, are aimed at attaching greater value to the participation of the rural women of the Americas in development.

Thank you for accepting our invitation to develop, side by side with rural women, an agenda that will enable us to incorporate principles of equity into all the instruments IICA uses to provide cooperation.



Victor M. Villalobos
Director General



F oreword

The present executive summary is a synopsis of the technical document *Policies to strengthen the contribution of women to agriculture and food security*. Its purpose is to initiate a process of discussion that will generate effective proposals for providing support to the rural women of the member countries of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA).

The summary comprises four parts. The first underscores the strategic importance of rural women for agricultural development and food security. The second provides an overview of their participation in agriculture. The third part focuses on the most important policies and instruments that exist to support rural women and promote gender equality. The fourth offers a number of recommendations on how best to formulate or strengthen policies focused on rural women.

It is important to bear in mind that the limited availability of up-to-date statistical data from the countries, as well as important variations in the national and subregional issues that affect rural women, make it difficult to conduct analyses, especially comparative analyses.



Importance of rural women in agriculture

Rural women are one of the driving forces behind the economy of rural territories and share equal responsibility for the development, stability and survival of their families. This dual role makes them strategically important for rural development and well-being, and an analysis of their multifaceted contributions reveals their potential. From the viewpoint of their contribution to agriculture, it is widely recognized that rural women produce between 60% and 80% of the food consumed in developing countries. This percentage may be even higher in the poorest rural areas. In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), almost half (45%) of the food consumed at home is produced by rural women.

Women who engage in backyard agriculture play a key role in the food security of their families, producing grains, vegetables, and other staple foods to be consumed at home. In addition, surplus food is sold on local markets, generating income they can use to supplement their diets. Regardless of what the family's main agricultural activity is, women participate actively in all the stages of the value chain (from planting season to harvest), agroindustrial processes and marketing. They also play a major role in the production of small livestock. In the case of large-scale livestock farming, they are generally responsible for watering and milking the animals and keeping stables and stalls clean. The income they generate help to meet basic needs not covered by the income generated from subsistence agriculture. In households, improvements in the family's nutrition are linked to decisions they take regarding the use and distribution of income.

Despite this substantial contribution, the participation of rural women in agriculture is not equitably

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integrated into the production system. They suffer from exclusion, as seen in the agricultural labor market, where they receive lower wages than men in similar positions. In addition, their work is not accurately reflected in statistics, which affects the formulation of public policies that are in line with reality and address existing gaps in terms of equity. The economic, work-related and food insecurity of rural women is one factor that influences the decision of young rural women to migrate to urban areas where more services are available, but where they end up accepting low-paying jobs. The exclusion of rural women and the lack of opportunities for them is one limitation for more sustainable and equitable agricultural and rural development.

2 Overview of the participation of rural women in agriculture in the hemisphere

In most of the countries of LAC, rural-urban migration is the norm. In others, the tendency is for the population to move from urban center to urban center. In the middle of these two dynamics, which act as poles, the rural milieu has changed, but continues to be of great importance to the countries. An analysis of information on 33 countries of the Americas reveals that a third or more of the population continues to be rural in 22 of them. The Caribbean is the most rural region of the Americas. Of the 13 countries considered, one third of the total population is rural in 12. A significant number of countries continue to be “structurally” rural.

Another characteristic of the region is the heterogeneity among countries and the cultural diversity of the different ethnic groups. The population of the 671 indigenous peoples in the region is estimated to be between 30 and 50 million. According to available statistics, indigenous men participate more than indigenous women in the economy of both urban and rural areas. Nonetheless, the women play a key role in producing food for their families.

Given the heterogeneity of the rural milieu in LAC, the living conditions of rural women and their access to basic services vary greatly from country to country. An example of such heterogeneity can be seen in the case of illiteracy rates for rural women; for the rural women involved in agriculture in Guatemala, the rate is 60.7%, while in Chile the figure is 6.7%.

Gaps in terms of equity in access to assets

The information available for the countries of LAC indicates that there are gaps in terms of equity vis-à-vis the acquisition, ownership and use of assets, goods and services, between rural men and women.

The most important gaps in terms of equity that affect rural women in LAC are access to education, labor markets, salaried employment, factors of production (land, credit, technology, etc.) and technical assistance and training. In most of the countries, rural women involved in agriculture have received, on average, four years of formal schooling or less. This is the case in Peru, Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Brazil and Bolivia. This average is below that of women who are unemployed or who work in non-agricultural jobs. Low levels of schooling and the resulting illiteracy have a direct impact on the income structure of households, limit the participation of women in technical training, their competitiveness and the adoption of new technologies and affect their attitude toward and perception of change. This situation only deepens poverty.

Rural women find it difficult to be considered as eligible for loans from banks and commercial institutions because their work is not considered to be "income-producing."

As regards employment, while in LAC the level of participation of rural women in the labor market has increased (from 32% to 46% between 1990 and 2005), it is still below that of rural men and urban women. A large part of the women working in agriculture appear in statistics as unpaid family workers (Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Guatemala and Ecuador), while only a small part are salaried workers (Chile, El Salvador and Paraguay). According to the information available, in LAC there are differences between men's and women's wages. In this regard, the gaps in income are wider in rural than in urban areas. In six countries (Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras and Peru) the gaps in income between men and women are narrower in agricultural activities than in non-agricultural activities. The situation is the opposite in Bolivia, Guatemala, Mexico and Paraguay, where the gaps in income

between men and women are wider in the case of agricultural activities than in non-agricultural activities.

Rural women do not have access to or control of land, which opens up another gap vis-à-vis men. Certain cultural practices or ways of organizing society or distributing the ownership of land result in different forms of discrimination against women. As a result, in some countries, constitutional reforms have been implemented that are aimed at ensuring equality and equitable treatment between the sexes as regards ownership of agricultural lands. In several countries, female heads of household have been included as beneficiaries in land titling schemes.

Rural women find it difficult to be considered as eligible for loans from banks and commercial institutions because their work is not considered to be “income-producing,” because they own no assets that they can put up as security and, lastly, because there is lack of policies intended to promote equality of opportunity in terms of access to loans.

Most female heads of household are the breadwinners in their families. However, they have few opportunities for training, technical assistance and, even less, for professional development. The longer this situation exists, the more vulnerable they will become to poverty.

Alternatives for rural women

In the face of these issues that affect rural women, the three strategies or alternatives they most frequently adopt to subsist are:

- To continue engaging in family agriculture, maintaining their traditional roles (backyard agriculture, care of animals) or in new roles that can be created as a result of changes in the operation of the farm;
- To take jobs in non-agricultural activities; and
- To migrate as a strategy for earning income (to be sent as remittances to their families).

As for the first option, it is important to point out, as a limitation, the fact that many rural women engage in a type of family agriculture whose principal resource is family labor, has limited capacity to produce surpluses for sale on

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local markets and uses rudimentary technology. Within this production matrix, the work of women in family agriculture is considered an extension of household chore and generally produces no income. An aging population also has an impact on these farms, where elderly, disabled, widowed, or indigenous women often face greater difficulties. When a woman heads a household in the family agriculture sector, her responsibilities in the area of production are in addition to the work she does at home, for which she receives no pay, increasing her workload.

Nonetheless, one element that deserves investigation is the capacity for transformation and innovation of rural women involved in family agriculture. This includes their potential as agents in changing the structure of family agriculture in an attempt to make it more competitive, thus opening up new opportunities for them. Another is the capacity for innovation they have shown in backyard agriculture; for example, in the diversification of species, which contributes to the food security of their families.

In this regard, there is consensus regarding the importance of the foods that come from the backyard garden for the food security of families. In several countries of the region, backyard farming is not only a source of a significant amount of food, but also medicinal products. In addition, it is a temporary source of employment or income for members of the family. The family garden can absorb the surplus labor and provide the minimum inputs required for the survival of the family unit. Studies conducted in Guatemala and Nicaragua show that, for poor rural families, the backyard garden can provide as much as 50% of the income of the household, taking into account the economic value of the food it provides for home consumption, any surpluses marketed and the products obtained through bartering.

Another of the strategies adopted by women in response to exclusion and inequity is to become salaried workers in non-agricultural activities. The tendency of rural women to

combine agricultural and non-agricultural activities is widespread and has been fully documented. The structural reason for this is the growth of non-agricultural activities in rural areas (rural tourism, tourism-related services, conservation and sustainable management of natural resources, environmental services, protection and management of biodiversity), which have created new sources of employment.

Lastly, women also resort to migration. There are many factors that motivate women to migrate, but it has been proven that what motivates them the most is their limited opportunities to own and use land, and low wages. Most rural women with little schooling that migrate to urban areas move into the labor force in the services sector, mostly as maids or in other low-paying jobs. Rural women from 15 to 19 years of age migrate more than men in all countries of the region. Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay and Panama have the highest levels of rural-urban migration.

International migration of both men and women is part of this strategy. In the case of the countries of Central America, this has meant that rural families increasingly depend on government subsidies and on remittances from relatives living in other countries. For example, in El Salvador, remittances from abroad constituted 18% of GDP in 2008, and 30% and 18% in Nicaragua and Haiti, respectively, in 2002, most of which were destined for rural areas.

One of the consequences of the high rates of rural-urban migration is that agricultural work is being done by the young and the elderly. In addition, the older adults living in rural areas are more likely to live alone because, as a result of such migration, their children no longer live with or near them. In some cases, the only contact is via remittances.

3 Some examples of the application of policies and instruments in support of rural women and gender equality and equity

In recent decades, numerous international conferences have been held in support of women and important agreements have been adopted. The Convention on

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is a case in point. The rights of rural women are highlighted in Article 14 of the convention and governments are urged to adopt appropriate measures to ensure that men and women enjoy equal opportunities for participating in rural development. The approval of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) placed gender equity on the public agenda, with governments pledging to incorporate gender equity into public policies. However, since the platform failed to include a specific section on rural women, the sector declined in importance on the international and national agendas.

As a result, since the end the 1990s many of the responsibilities of programs targeted at rural women within the agricultural sector have been transferred to the so-called “mechanisms for women” (in their capacity as policy-making bodies), which include the national secretariats and institutes responsible for women’s affairs and gender equity, which have focused primarily on the urban sector, leaving few opportunities for actions targeted at rural women. Policies targeted directly at women were replaced with a gender mainstreaming approach. However, this has become a declaration of principles rather than a means to implement differentiated actions for men and women. All of this has left major gaps in policies, strategies, legislation and research, and in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs in support of rural women.

Furthermore, the restructuring of the public institutions of the different sectors that used to provide services to the rural milieu has included the dismantling of the structures that directly supported rural women. Consequently, in many countries little is being done to meet women’s needs, although international cooperation agencies continue to include women on their agenda.

As a result of the above, specific public policies targeted at rural women are not being implemented in LAC. In some countries, such as Mexico and Costa Rica, attempts have

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been made to institute selective social policies for vulnerable groups. Some of those policies have stressed the need for intersectoral coordination but have found putting it into practice very difficult. Other countries, such as Chile, have opted for gender mainstreaming in policies, channeling the implementation of programs for rural women via the institutional framework. These programs are far from constituting a universal policy for rural women, however. At present, they are only pilot initiatives with a limited impact, for specific areas.

The lessons learned from the efforts to integrate the gender perspective effectively into development programs include the following:

- The gender approach is integrated by means of small, isolated projects or specific components for women that form part of larger programs. The gender components are secondary and not central to the core objectives of the program concerned. The reported impact of interventions of this kind is low, because they are usually small in scale. The financial resources allocated also tend to be limited.
- The technical personnel in charge of the extension practices employed with rural women have still not taken those practices on board in a systematic way. Models for long-term training need to be created or strengthened to change the vision with respect to technical assistance and rural extension.

One aspect of the process of implementing gender-inclusive policies that has yet to be studied in any depth is the role that the private sector can play in improving the living conditions of rural women. Until now, the efforts of the private sector have been restricted mainly to the practical implementation of social responsibility policies by businesses. This practice is still very limited, especially as far as companies that engage in primary agricultural activities are concerned.

Below are some policies and instruments applied in IICA member countries:

Policies designed to afford access to productive assets:

Policies of this kind have been implemented repeatedly in the countries and within the agricultural sector. However, they have not been effective enough to meet the specific needs of rural women producers; policies intended to improve access to land are a case in point. Ownership translates into well-being for women and their families because the redistribution of land goes hand in hand with the recognition of their identity and culture.

Venezuela's Land and Agrarian Development Act, passed in 2001, is a good example of legislation that establishes specific provisions for rural women. Furthermore, it singles out women heads of household who agree to farm plots of land to maintain their family group. It also guarantees women involved in agricultural production a prenatal and postnatal food subsidy. In other countries, initiatives have been implemented involving the titling of land that is owned jointly. However, in practice cultural and institutional factors continue to determine access to land, due to the failure to recognize the extent of women's participation in the production process.

Production activities as a way for women to achieve economic autonomy

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have been identified as a useful means for women to generate their own income through production activities, and thus achieve autonomy and empowerment and reduce inequalities.

A good example is an enterprise called La Rosquilla in the municipality of Yalaguina (Nicaragua), where rural women have been the driving force behind the development of the rosquilla industry and the emerging production and marketing of this traditional product, transforming the economic geography of La Esperanza Community and the municipal district in the process. This initiative highlights some of the conditions needed to develop a small enterprise: ownership of some productive assets, good connections and influence that make it possible to secure loans, a demonstrated capacity for innovation, human capital, and a business logic based on competitiveness. The organizational factor, values of solidarity, and the democratization of technical learning made an important contribution to the success of this enterprise run by women. The conclusion of this pilot initiative is that policies and strategies for SMEs and agribusinesses should incorporate the specificities and multiple activities of rural women and the options available to them for integration into the workforce.

If tasks and responsibilities related to care are not shared within the household, especially between the spouses, rural women continue to carry the heavier workload.

Care policies and their impact on women's economic autonomy

Many rural women have traditionally had to take care of their families, making it difficult for them to enter the labor market if no public services are available for the care of their children or other family members (elderly adults). If tasks and responsibilities related to care are not shared within the household, especially between the spouses, rural women continue to carry the heavier workload.

In Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay and the countries of the Central American isthmus, childcare policies are part of anti-poverty programs, with children receiving assistance through different conditional cash transfer schemes. The mothers should always be involved in running these programs, which will be more successful if they are. In many cases, however, such programs prevent women from joining the workforce and becoming professionals. In Chile, the last two governments have implemented measures to promote the incorporation of women into the labor market, including the provision of childcare services for working days of eight hours or more, for poor female workers who are employed or seeking work. The women receive economic assistance from the state and the children participating in the programs receive food and health care.

4 Recommendations for the formulation and/or strengthening of policies and instruments aimed at promoting rural women and improving their linkages to agriculture and food security

The main recommendations contained in the document are as follows:

1. Assist IICA's member countries with the preparation of public policies linked to the agricultural sector that take into account the special characteristics of

rural men and women, implementing them through programs that form part of the structure of the government agencies concerned. These programs must be capable of conducting permanent analyses of legislation and economic and political regulations, and managing the information used to assess the state of the sector and evaluate the effects and impact of interventions.

2. The formulation, management, and evaluation of public policies with a gender equity approach and the promotion of rural women calls for accessible statistical information disaggregated by sex and age group. Given the present lack of data of this kind, the international cooperation agencies should pool efforts to generate the necessary information and include in the working methods of international organizations the recording of quantitative data on the situation of rural women.
3. Strengthen efforts to achieve the fair application of legislation and decrees dealing with land ownership, with emphasis on respect for women's rights. This entails reviewing the legal frameworks governing land ownership and their bearing on the cultural conditions of rural territories, particularly those with large indigenous populations. If the implementation of these policies is to be successful, they must be accompanied by financing, security regarding land ownership, respect for private property, land titling and efforts to combat the illegal sale of land.
4. Improvements to the productive capacity of women agricultural producer. Effectively transforming the productive capacity of rural women and promoting their contribution to agriculture and food security calls not only for innovative agricultural extension systems, but also for the creation of a new paradigm for rural education, including improving access to agricultural higher education, strengthening rural education systems and using them to promote programs involving technological innovation for productivity.

The countries should continue strengthening their microcredit and finance programs in rural areas, promoting the organization and association of women producers.

5. Strengthening of the production activities of rural women. One of the best ways of improving the contribution of women agricultural producers to food security is by promoting and supporting their entrepreneurial spirit. Therefore, the countries should step up their efforts to promote the development of rural SMEs and expand the services available to agricultural SMEs.
6. Foster credit and finance mechanisms adapted to rural conditions and the actual situation of rural women producers. The countries should continue strengthening their microcredit and finance programs in rural areas, promoting the organization and association of women producers. This calls for the review, adjustment, and application of new financing instruments and the strengthening of civil society organizations.
7. Implement food security strategies, policies, and programs to enhance women's capabilities and eliminate the constraints they face vis-à-vis access to and control over resources and services. Closely linked to food security is the participation of women in family agriculture. Especially important is the need to study women's capacity for transformation and innovation within family agriculture. This includes a range of issues that need to be explored, such as the role of backyard agriculture in the diversification and improvement of species and the contribution of this type of agriculture to families' food security.
8. Strengthening of social protection networks for rural women, with emphasis on women agricultural producers. To facilitate the integration of women into the labor market and strengthen their contribution to the development of agriculture and food security, there is a need to strengthen the social networks for the care and protection of the family. In the case of women involved in agriculture, innovative education models and rural schools are required that incorporate the concept of competitiveness. These models should also make provision for the time that women need to perform their agricultural activities. A public/private partnership focusing on the issue is needed to tackle this challenge.
9. Promote and systematize territorial development experiences carried out in the countries and in which rural women are key actors. One cooperation action that should be considered is an initiative to extract lessons learned and develop useful tools for other initiatives in the same country, or in other ones.

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