

Empowering women

This note addresses practices for reducing gender inequalities and for empowering women to make a positive contribution to development through agricultural investments.

Women make a crucial contribution to the agriculture sector and account for over 40 percent of agricultural labor in developing countries. However, they are frequently marginalized and their contributions under-acknowledged. Agricultural investments may perpetuate or accentuate gender inequalities if proactive gender policies are not adopted. There are significant economic and social gains to be had from closing the gender gap in agriculture. This note provides investors and governments with guidance on how to do so.



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RESPONSIBLE AGRICULTURAL INVESTMENT (RAI)

KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION NOTES

The **UNCTAD–World Bank *Knowledge Into Action Note Series*** is a compendium of practical, thematic guidance documents for use by governments, investors, and other stakeholders in the implementation of responsible agricultural investment principles. Background and a complete list of notes are in *Note 1: Introduction*.



WHAT DOES FIELD RESEARCH SHOW?

Employment opportunities. Investments create new employment opportunities for women. In recent World Bank–UNCTAD fieldwork, 80 percent of employee respondents—both men and women—felt that women had better employment opportunities than before the investor’s activities began. All women interviewed said they felt better off because of employment.

Changing gender roles in society. Women’s new jobs at investments are helping transform traditional, restrictive gender norms. In many of the investments visited, especially in remote rural areas where little to no previous formal employment opportunities existed, men actively discouraged women, and especially married women, from becoming employed. Men’s concerns were grounded in cultural norms about women’s household responsibilities, including looking after children. Men also held the traditional view that it is the role of the man to earn cash income. Other research has found that women are sometimes forced to hand over wages to their husbands (Bugri et al. 2013). However, in some cases, the presence of an investor was shifting attitudes. Several male interviewees who were initially reluctant to allow their wives to work for the company commented that they had come to appreciate the additional income their wives contributed to the household. In Ethiopia, investments appear to be contributing to economic empowerment and lifestyle transformations for women (box 1).

Gender gaps in the nature and seniority of work. A gendered division of labor existed across several dimensions. Female employment tended to be concentrated in low-paid manual tasks such as planting, watering, weeding, harvesting, packing, and sorting. Such work is lower paid and devalued by others precisely because it is seen as “women’s work.” Women were paid lower wages to perform similar tasks. Women were less likely to be employed in higher positions and more likely to be in temporary or seasonal employment. Women were nearly absent at the

Box 1. Investments, women's employment, and changing gender norms in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, women are historically and culturally precluded from working outside the home. Before getting married, many working women are pressured by family members to quit their jobs, which are seen as inappropriate to their new social roles as wives.

Employment opportunities created by investors have begun to change these attitudes. Companies often prefer to hire women because they are perceived as more responsible and reliable. "It is [now] also easier to get both long-term and short-term work for a woman," female workers stated. Their families are starting to value their economic contributions. One female worker said that, because of this employment opportunity, "I can buy what I need and make savings. Occasionally I also partly support my parents." Women are therefore participating in employment opportunities at higher rates. Some female workers are encouraging other women to join them. There are now opportunities for women who would otherwise struggle for income. Women are switching from temporary to permanent positions and have more opportunities for promotion.

Agricultural investments are thus helping to reduce the social stigmatization in conservative rural areas of women who work, and are enhancing women's empowerment. For some women, the job represents a way of gaining financial independence—for example, by offering a means of getting out of a bad marriage. Particularly for young women, these new attitudes are visible in lifestyle changes, reflective of an increasing transformation of attitudes and the shifting position of women in society.

Source: UNCTAD–World Bank Responsible Agricultural Investment Database.

highest level of management in the operations visited. Some investors claimed that the gender gap is due to the lack of qualified women, but few investors had specific training programs to redress this imbalance.

Grievance redress mechanisms. Gender-sensitive mechanisms for dealing with workplace grievances were important tools for challenging women's subordination on agricultural investments. Men were concerned that their spouses would suffer sexual exploitation in the workplace, and this made them feel reluctant to allow their wives to work. In one case, a male supervisor was reportedly offering employment to women in return for sexual favors. When this drawn to the attention of the investor, disciplinary action was taken.

Lower participation in outgrower schemes. Women are systematically excluded from opportunities to participate in outgrower projects. This is often a result of unequal access to land and restrictions on women holding formal land titles—usually a prerequisite for participation in an outgrower scheme. Female outgrowers generally receive less information on agricultural production and have less access to extension services than male outgrowers.

Women can succeed as producers when given the opportunity. Women have excelled in production when they have been given the chance to participate and have received direct assistance from investors. For example, several women said that the chance to run their own farm and the income received were highly valued and built their confidence in their own capabilities. In one case, a woman had acquired land with the assistance of the investor, which provided her with company tractors through a lease arrangement. She was therefore able to prepare her land and become a successful and respected commercial farmer. In another case, a woman in company management had formally acquired land through the government's land procurement procedures. She was developing it with orchard crops as a part-time farmer, also with support from the investor management.

✓ ELEMENTS OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR INVESTORS

Improve women's access to land. Investors can provide women with alternative means of accessing land, given that tenure rights are usually vested with the male household head under customary laws and practices. In one case an investor made land available on the estate for women to undergo training in the production of soya seed for use by the company and outgrowers and for sale to other producers. Investors can engage with traditional authorities and men to convince them to allocate land to women. Engagement at the community level is key to promote gender transformative changes.

Training programs for employees. Employers can develop specific training programs to address women's needs and constraints. Critically, this must involve identifying the issues women face in each specific context, by speaking to women themselves, as well as knowledgeable stakeholders such as local women's rights organizations. For example, one employer recognized that women, specifically widows, struggled in their attempt to prepare their land. A "how to" program was developed to assist widows with producing homegrown food year-round. Another way is to make women-only training events available, thus enabling women to feel more comfortable as they learn among their peers.

Selection and training of outgrowers. When training is provided to outgrowers, consideration should be given to training both men and women from the same family. Similarly, both spouses can sign the outgrower contract, where appropriate. Selection criteria for participating in outgrower schemes can be adapted to allow greater female participation; for example, by adjusting rules on holding land title where women are unable to do so or by allowing more than one person per household to join the scheme. Investors should also ensure that women are provided with relevant information on how to enter outgrower schemes, possibly through women-targeted communication campaigns.

Box 2. Five-dimensional framework for reducing gender equalities in agriculture

- Land rights encompass differences between men and women with respect to access, ownership, and control over land, and the income associated with its productive use.
- Productive resources relate to gender discrimination in terms of access to credit, production inputs, training, and extension services.
- Household labor responsibilities tend to fall on women and impinge on formal employment.
- Employment encompasses the gender division of labor and the gender divide in employment conditions.
- Decision making refers to discriminatory practices that limit women's voice within their households and workplaces



Source: Adapted from IISD 2017.

Improve access to inputs and finance. To overcome women's limited access to agricultural inputs and finance, employers can facilitate their linkages to input providers and financial institutions. One investor has developed relationships with formal, women-run savings and credit groups, offering technical assistance and buying their surplus grain.

Improve access to markets. Employers should facilitate women's access to market opportunities. One investor responded positively when approached by a women's elected representative to the local administrative area, who requested that the company assist in setting up market stalls where women in the community could trade agricultural produce they had grown on their own land. The result was that women farmers could then sell their produce to company personnel, who also appreciated the proximity of the service.

Help alleviate the burden of household responsibilities. Employers should provide services that help alleviate women's dual burden of work at their jobs and for their households. For example, one employer established an on-site daycare at its packing facility. Another employer established flexible working schedules for women to help them better manage their work duties and household responsibilities. Another employer provided cooking facilities at the packing house, which allowed women to prepare food to take home for their families.

Preferential hiring policies. Companies should adopt gender-sensitive employment policies, with specific targets for women. One employer decided that each section of his business would have a minimum number of women employees. An even better way to keep a good balance is to instate minimum women-to-men ratios. Such targets work best if they are realistic and implemented incrementally over time in parallel with training programs and as more qualified women enter the workforce. Investors should develop less stringent hiring criteria for women in communities where they face educational disadvantages. In developing countries, girls often have less access to education than boys, which fuels the gender imbalance in accessing jobs. Executing preferential hiring policies for women can facilitate their integration into the workforce. For example, one employer required a minimum grade point average of 3.0 for men and 2.75 for women, to be eligible for a vacancy.

Facilitate women's legal status to work. Employers can help women overcome certain bureaucratic barriers that they are more likely to face than men in the hiring process. For example, in Mozambique, women typically did not have the identification cards required for employment. One investor assisted them with the paperwork to get these cards issued, which in turn enabled them to be formally employed by the company.

Discrimination and harassment policies. Investors can institute strict mechanisms for dealing with gender-based acts of discrimination and harassment. Investors should develop targeted training to inform women of their rights and the mechanisms that exist to protect them. Some employers developed an employee grievance mechanism that allowed women to easily access help through a dedicated female representative in human resources, without directly involving their superior or colleagues.

Ensuring participation in decision-making. Supporting women's participation in investment negotiations from the project outset should be encouraged. Investors should help ensure that women are included in consultations with communities about a prospective investment, so that their views are taken into account. Women are often underrepresented or absent from the committees that are in charge of making important decisions, even those that affect them directly. Employers should ensure women are represented at all levels, as well as assist in building their organizational capacity through appropriate training programs. One investor set up a community liaison committee and insisted that youth and women be represented. Another

investor established a gender committee composed largely of female employees representing all sections of the operation, including the administrative staff. A key role of this committee was to raise the awareness of female staff regarding their right to equal pay and their reproductive rights. Importantly, the committee also provided a conduit for women to report on violations of these rights and made much progress in raising awareness of gender-related rights.

✓ ELEMENTS OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR GOVERNMENTS

Partnerships with organizations that promote women's rights. Facilitating the development of partnerships and networks with civil society organizations, farmers' groups, and women's co-operatives is good practice. Such collaborations can contribute to women's economic empowerment and the creation of support networks for their business and work endeavors.

Improve gender sensitivity of policy frameworks. The government's role in reducing gender inequality is also important. Governments have a critical role to play in reducing the structural inequalities faced by women: for example, in access to education and legal redress mechanisms, and the ability to collectively mobilize and claim political rights. In some cases, this role might involve improving legal systems but more often it relates to enforcing existing laws. Overall, governments can strengthen the gender sensitivity of policy frameworks governing agricultural investments.

Require investors to empower women or prioritize those that do. Governments have a crucial role to play in ensuring that investors promote women's empowerment and protect women's rights. They could do this through legally requiring all investors in a country to include women in every phase of the investment negotiations, requiring investors to recruit and train specific ratios of women, requiring female representation at all levels of the business, and including in investment contracts targets for women's employment and representation. Governments can prioritize investments and business models that are more likely to have a positive gender impact, such as processing facilities, where women are more likely to be hired.

Female extension officers. Training women as extension officers should be considered, so that training to smallholders can be provided in a more gender-sensitive manner.

Education for men on their role. Women's rights as agricultural laborers or contract farmers are going to be respected only if men are part of the story. For both investors and governments, a further key recommendation is educating men, as colleagues and employers, but also as relatives who can restrict women's access to productive resources (World Bank 2012).

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

This Note is complementary to the literature and guidance documents to which many organizations have contributed, a selection of which is provided below. Further resources are provided in *Note 2: Additional resources*.

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Country examples:

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