



The Impact of Women Farmers for Agricultural Development, the Case of Women Farmers in Central Region - Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture is a crucial sector for human survival, and women's contribution to it is undeniable. Women contribute over half of the labor force engaged in agriculture. These women make up about 70 percent of the farm work force and often play an active role in the daily activities which include heavy physical work on the farm and they perform many of the same tasks as males. The average time devoted by women in agricultural operation is 8 to 9 hours per day.

Women play a crucial role in agriculture, both in small and big farms, producing food for their households, communities, and beyond. However, despite their significant contribution, women often face cultural, social, and economic barriers that limit their productivity and ability to fully participate in agricultural development, including unequal access to resources, cultural and traditional barriers, and gender-based violence.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Agriculture, Management, Labor force, Farm work.

1. Introduction

Malawi being a fast-growing country, still remains as one of the country with farmers below poverty line in the world and it is prone to weather-related shocks and experiences high levels of food insecurity. Hence agriculture still remain a vital way of making ends meet as tobacco, tea, cotton, groundnuts, sugar, maize and coffee are the main economic products.

2. Literature Review

According to the 2011 UN women press release, "rural women constitute one-fourth of the world's population. They account for a great proportion of the agricultural labor force, produce the majority of food grown, especially in subsistence farming, and perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas." The 2010 National Statistics Office (NSO) figures also indicate that in Malawi, women constitute 52 percent of the 17 plus million people. And although women's produce is 64.1 percent of country's labor force and food needs for home consumption, according to the ministry of agriculture, they have little control over the produce and benefit less from the income earned. Of the 17 million Malawian households, 80 percent are rural. Of these, 25 percent households are headed by a woman, most of whom are impoverished. In a 2012 policy brief paper issued by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), poor extension services are noted as the main attribute to the poor agricultural production in the country. According to the paper, women farmers still receive only 5 percent of all agricultural extension services

Different observations by different authors have revealed that women's participation in agriculture is of great importance as they are gatekeepers of food security and National development. Women play a crucial role in agriculture, both in small and big farms, producing food for their households, communities, and beyond.

The study also demonstrate that Malawi's agriculture is largely rain fed, particularly among smallholders, and the country is at critical risk of water stress. Water security is essential for agriculture in a changing climate, but women typically have lower levels of access to men in water technologies, such as irrigation which result in differing levels of productivity for men and women farmers.

The analysis supported the theory that, women's role in agriculture is typically constrained by a combination of four key factors: lower education levels, lesser control over natural resources, reduced labor availability (due to gender roles which govern their role in caretaking) and minimal access to financial and technology resources.

Constraints faced by women farmers

The results indicate that women play a key role in agriculture in Malawi, producing 70% of food that is consumed locally. However, a gender-sensitive approach is required to address some of the inequalities women face as rights and rules mean that only a third of agricultural holdings in Malawi are held by women (and this is still higher than in many African countries). More often than not, women's access to land is through the family head, who is typically a man. Thus although they perform 50–70% of all agricultural tasks, women rarely have control over the land or the yields. USAID reports that women are more likely than men to improve the health and nutrition of their families, and communities with women serving as strong leaders may fare better in events of climate disaster. And this gender inequality comes at a huge cost, not just for women, but society as a whole.

Gender and agriculture

Women continue to have less secure land tenure than men, despite legal and institutional reforms to protect their rights. They have limited access to financial services and products, such as, credit and insurance, due to limited ownership of assets, lower literacy levels, limited mobility and social norms. Women shoulder more responsibility for 'unpaid care and domestic work', which creates time and labour constraint on their engagement in agriculture.

3. Conclusion

For a long time, Malawian smallholder farmers have relied on the government but the farmers are not improving their productivity because they are not able to access training information on the best farming techniques, new or higher-yielding crop varieties and low-input technologies, or on which crops are likely to produce most profit next season.

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