

MEANINGFUL ACTION

Effective approaches to women's economic empowerment in agriculture

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The growing focus on creating employment for women is welcome, but for women to be economically empowered, it must be decent work with safeguards, alongside integrated interventions to address the structural barriers faced by women. Without this dual approach, evidence shows that apart from a few exceptional women leaders, the majority of women may not be able to access jobs or benefit fully from them. Working women continue to face heavy and unequal responsibilities for household work and care, remaining in low-paid and precarious work, and vulnerable to abuse. Successful experiences have stemmed from integrated investments in social infrastructure, such as women's organisations, social protection, essential services and positive social norms, with transparent governance supporting good employment practices such as written contracts and a living wage.

EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN AGRICULTURE

'Empowering women and girls with more choices and more freedoms is crucial to achieving a better future for all.' – Amartya Sen, 2012¹

Many governments, companies and development actors agree on the importance of the agenda for women's economic empowerment, based on compelling evidence on both equality and economic development. When women have income and assets, this contributes to increased productivity and national development. It also leads to better human development and poverty reduction outcomes, as women's control over assets and income is linked to improvements in family welfare and child nutrition.² Women's economic empowerment offers an entry point into full women's empowerment, which also includes social and political dimensions. Achieving gender equality and women's rights is an end in itself, as enshrined in numerous human rights frameworks.³

Enhancing women's empowerment in agriculture specifically is also critical, given that women comprise on average 43 percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries,⁴ and that approximately 75 percent of people suffering hunger live in rural areas.⁵ Women's agricultural roles vary widely, and governments are developing flexible policy mechanisms to support them. For example, the Philippines government has made a substantial commitment to promoting gender equality through its 'magna carta' for women, which requires all ministries to allocate 5 percent of their budgets to women's programmes. The aim of the gender plan outlined by the agricultural ministry is for women in the agriculture, fisheries and forestry sectors to be recognized and to have

This Oxfam background report was written to share research and programme results, to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development policy and practice. It does not necessarily reflect Oxfam policy positions. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Oxfam.

access to productive resources and extension services. The 2011–15 development plan also includes objectives to develop appropriate micro-credit programmes for women.

Corporate leaders have likewise argued for increasing investments in women's economic empowerment, based in part on returns to their businesses. In the United States 64 percent of companies surveyed stated that investments in women had or would increase employee productivity and retention in 'emerging markets'.⁶ For companies, enabling women's full potential to be realized means a more talented pool of workers, a more stable supply of basic commodities and greater appeal to consumers. It requires companies to work with suppliers, competitors and local stakeholders to drive changes that extend beyond the farm and factory. Oxfam's Behind the Brands campaign has shown that companies can commence this journey by understanding the situation of women in their supply chains, but the large food and beverage companies have yet to adopt systems that address gender issues across their supply chains.⁷

Private and public sector leaders also prioritize women's economic empowerment because of the evidence linking economic empowerment to women's overall well-being⁸ and the consequent well-being of their families. Yet the fact that women have the opportunity to take a job or to start an enterprise in agriculture or agri-business cannot on its own guarantee such benefits. Oxfam's Gendered, enterprise and markets (GEM)⁹, Enterprise development (EDP)¹⁰ and WEMAN¹¹ programmes amongst others, have shown to achieve well-being and to contribute to economic growth through economic participation, women must enjoy other rights. This requires a broader investment in areas such as skills and training for women as workers or to run small businesses, supporting mechanisms which elevate collective women's voice and influence, in accessing markets and in ensuring greater control over income and assets in households. Likewise, women require increased access to health and care services and the promotion of positive social norms which underpin women's roles in economic life and beyond. Safeguards in employment practices are also needed to ensure that women are accessing decent work. However, illiteracy, ill-health and insecurity are too often the conditions under which women are offered economic opportunities. Unsafe transport, violence and harassment can make it hard for them to remain in paid jobs in factories and on farms, or to sell their products at markets. Unwanted pregnancy and preventable illnesses ruin promising enterprises and limit women's advancement in employment.

As demonstrated by recent reports from a range of perspectives, such as studies by the World Bank,¹² Dalberg and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)¹³ and AWID,¹⁴ and by many of Oxfam's programmes, when women do not enjoy equal rights to inheritance, land or the benefits of technology, and where social norms limit their mobility or right to control income and finance, they cannot take advantage of the economic opportunities provided. Put positively, complementary investments in women's economic empowerment and social and political rights tend to create a virtuous circle. Interventions that promote a range of rights for women ensure that investments in their economic empowerment are not derailed. This virtuous cycle continues: when women can fully and successfully engage in economic development initiatives, they are able to exercise other rights.

Integrating training on numeracy and literacy within agricultural training can be critical, as the case study on bee-keeping in Amhara, Ethiopia published with this report indicates. This has helped women to join agricultural cooperatives, create higher-quality products and increase their incomes. It has also built their confidence, knowledge and skills to participate in local decision making and to be involved in savings groups and community activities without being constrained by restrictions imposed by male family members. Awareness-raising among women on their rights can also have long-term benefits through the generational transfer of such knowledge to the next cadre of women workers, creating a 'multiplier effect'.

MORE IS NEEDED THAN JOBS ALONE

Initiatives that are successful in promoting women's economic empowerment combine and integrate interventions to increase their participation in markets and job creation with broader investment in

social infrastructure, supportive norms and related safeguards for decent work. This means that investments by a vibrant private sector to create jobs need to take place in a context of wider interventions to achieve human development and women's broader empowerment.

Some employers provide childcare, safe transport to work or on-site clinics to enable women to retain their jobs and advance in them. Likewise, some government employment creation programmes are combined with building schools or improving sanitation. These specific services and interventions are commendable. However, it is necessary to realize such measures on a larger scale to ensure a broader enabling environment that creates the space for wide-scale women's economic empowerment and addresses the structural barriers that push women into precarious low-paid and unpaid work, leaving them with less control over assets and income in the home.

Economists affirm that a base level of institutions and infrastructure are critical to support economic growth and social policy.¹⁵ However, too often, poor provision of these public goods results in women bearing a heavy and disproportionate responsibility for providing the services for this human development and social fabric through unpaid and voluntary work.

Box 1: Increasing women's control over time, and economic growth

In Copán, Honduras, the Nuevo Amanecer rural enterprise conducted a Rapid Care Analysis¹⁶ which revealed that women worked on average a 94-hour work, compared with 61 hours a week for men; it also documented the lack of public services. Male leaders joined with a successful advocacy effort by women's group members to get the National Electrical Energy Company (ENEE) to undertake a \$100,000 electricity generating project, co-financed by the National Congress. With electricity installed, Nuevo Amanecer invested in an electric grinding mill and a refrigerator, eliminating arduous hand-grinding of corn, creating jobs for women in sales of processed foods and generating an income for the Nuevo Amanecer.

Domestic work limits rural women's participation in and benefit from economic development. Women's heavy and unequal responsibility for care work is a significant, often invisible barrier to their involvement in the labour market and affects their productivity and food security.¹⁷ In 2012, when Oxfam surveyed 20 enterprise development initiatives, staff reported that women leaders were dropping out because of difficulties in renegotiating household responsibilities. Positively, investments in infrastructure and services by governments, NGOs and employers can significantly reduce and redistribute care work, with positive impacts on women's economic empowerment. In Tanzania, when measures achieved a one-hour reduction for every ten hours spent on collecting water and fuel, the probability that women would engage in off-farm business activities increased 7 percent.¹⁸

National social security programmes and institutions to implement and enforce social protection are another critical element of an enabling policy environment that helps to ensure new employment opportunities for women to result in sustainable economic development, rather than short-term gains in income that are undermined by hidden costs.

Box 2: Helping women workers to claim their rights

In Morocco, strawberry production has increased 14-fold over the past three decades, with 20,000 women workers meeting the demand for labour in the sector. Before 2010, the mostly female labour force was informally recruited by male intermediaries, and women faced extremely long hours of work and payment below minimum wage levels, with physically harsh conditions and often the threat of sexual harassment. With support from Oxfam and civil society partners, female workers were trained on their rights and in literacy, which enabled them to claim labour rights, call for adequate health and safety measures and address the problem of harassment. Fifty-two per cent more workers were registered for social security, which entitles a woman worker with two children to 40 per cent more income. The Moroccan government has

welcomed this approach and now sends social security staff to support female workers registering for the benefit. Employers report increased productivity and a more stable workforce.

Collaborations between a range of actors can accelerate positive change or enable progress where change is absent, including internationally. In their work to help strawberry workers in Morocco claim their rights, Oxfam, British retailers and strawberry importers involved in the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI)¹⁹ have played a critical role. These organizations have encouraged the Moroccan government to comply with employment law and ensure that workers have social security, and they are looking to engage in further dialogue with the government to support and bring about change (see the case study published with this report).

When governments, private sector companies, agricultural producers and workers' unions, women's organizations and civil society intentionally work together or form partnerships, positive change can be achieved at scale.

Box 3: Recognizing women's contribution to the value chain

Fundación Alpina, the foundation of the Latin American multinational dairy processing company, and Oxfam collaborated on a dairy project in Colombia. Historically, many providers of training and technical assistance have been reluctant to provide training for women farmers, as women were unrecognized and invisible as farmers in supply chains and in communities from which they sourced. Oxfam and Fundación Alpina commissioned a study which demonstrated that women handled up to 72 per cent of milk production and were responsible for cleaning milking utensils on farms supplying milk. Fundación Alpina then agreed to invest in hygiene training, formally recognizing women's role in the value chain. It also saw the value in Oxfam offering technical advice on business plans, training and organizational strengthening to consolidate the business ideas of women producers. This programme is now being scaled-up by Alpina with government support (see the longer case study published with this report).

Working together requires clarity about what is meant by economic empowerment for women, and how such economic gains can be sustained. Women's economic empowerment has been described in various ways. Over the last decades, for example, in many regions of the world, women's labour force participation has increased.²⁰ Likewise, women's enterprises that bring about increases in women's incomes and improved access to assets are considered to be economic empowerment.

Box 4: Facilitating collaboration to help break down economic barriers

Oxfam has facilitated collaboration between governments and businesses to design integrated services, or asset transfers that enable women to overcome structural economic barriers. In northwest Bangladesh, for example, Oxfam has worked with both local government and PRAN, a national chilli processor, to create a model that has impacts for a range of women who are normally marginalized from the economy. Following the transfer of communal land plots through a regional government social protection programme, a small number of extremely poor women have moved away from the drudgery of low-paid agricultural work to become producers investing in chilli production alongside growing basic food stuffs for family consumption. They and existing women smallholders, who form 60 per cent of a local producer organization, have developed chilli production, sustained through training and a stable market offered by PRAN. Oxfam has provided the initial capacity building to ensure that the producer organization supporting the collective production and marketing of chilli was sustainable.

While women's economic empowerment generally refers to increasing women's participation in the labour market or enterprises, increased income, and access and control over (productive) assets, for Oxfam this cannot be separated from the wider dimensions of women's empowerment. Oxfam's understanding of sustainable and meaningful empowerment for women in the economic sphere

includes addressing the broader structural barriers to women's progress. Interventions that increase women's market participation alone may simply add additional time pressures and continue to push women into low-paid, insecure and unsafe work. Moreover, increased income for women may not lead to meaningful empowerment without increased control over decisions on how this income is spent within the home.

It is therefore critical to look beyond economic participation and the numbers of women employed in paid work to the quality of jobs; the level and stability of women's control over income, assets and time; and the role of paid economic activities in their working lives as a whole. It is essential to build women's economic leadership by building their influence and voice on economic decisions in the market, in key decision-making institutions and in the home. Women's collectives have played a key role in this regard. Research on women's collective action in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania found significant economic benefits for women producers who joined collective action groups when compared with women trading alone. Women in groups were more productive, received more income for their products, had better access to market information and had improved access to credit and more decision-making power over it.²¹ Essential, too, is action to create supportive norms and institutions, to ensure that new roles and employment opportunities create positive change for women, rather than coming at an additional cost. Furthermore, studies have documented unintended costs of women's paid work for *families*, due to requirements of employment and public works programmes.²² If there is a sole focus on the economic empowerment of adult women, without infrastructure and services for supporting care, there may be negative outcomes such as reducing the quality of care for children or removing older girls from school to provide substitute care. This potentially perpetuates inter-generational poverty rather than reducing it.

Box 5: Improving conditions for waged workers

In Kenya, Oxfam and International Procurement and Logistics Ltd (IPL) studied the role of women horticultural workers and smallholder farmers in the supply chain for cut flowers and green beans. The study found that women smallholders reported three times the income of women who worked for wages. Women waged workers were generally disempowered, with roles highly demarcated by gender and a high risk of sexual harassment during the recruitment of contract labour. There was also a lack of quality childcare provided by employers, so informal providers have sprung up, carrying the risk of negligence and abuse of children. In this case, 'economic empowerment' of adult women can come at the cost of their children's welfare and education, and is thus not generationally sustainable.

There is a positive lesson to this story, however. Some women horticultural workers were found to have benefited particularly from skilled work in packhouses, and over the past ten years have experienced real improvements such as more stable contracts, higher wages (though still well short of a living wage), better health and safety conditions and a reduction in sexual harassment. Key enabling factors were developing institutions as well as markets and collaborative ways of working: for example, companies implementing the ETI Base Code, more professional human resource management, Fair-trade certification and improved government regulation.

This broader approach should first be captured in the ways in which women's economic empowerment is measured, which must focus on what matters, not simply on what is easiest to count. This may mean looking beyond simply counting jobs to measuring growth in decent jobs that work for women, or looking beyond increases in women's earnings and at the extent to which women are actually able to make and influence decisions, based on what they earn. It is important that the development or application of tools to measure empowerment should include some component of self-definition or self-assessment by women themselves.

Second, Oxfam's ambition for women's economic empowerment goes beyond creating 'islands of success' of a few exceptional women entrepreneurs or one company's good employment practices. Changes in institutional policy, in culture and in social norms are critical for long-lasting change and

for empowerment beyond the beneficiaries of Oxfam projects, as the case studies published with this report explore. This will require recognition of the contradictions in macro-economic policy making and trade policies that can undermine these efforts, alongside the need for greater levels of complementary investments in women's social and political empowerment. Failure to consider the particular situation of women and girls can unwittingly lead governments to reinforce gender inequalities. A transformational shift is therefore needed in the design and implementation of policies to remove the barriers that inhibit women's economic empowerment.

Box 7: Giving women a voice and addressing social norms

Overcoming social norms and cultural attitudes to enable women to take advantage of economic opportunities, and to avoid violence if they do, requires parallel interventions on structural barriers for women, including social norms. In Nepal, as well as supporting two large seed-producing cooperatives through its enterprise fund, Oxfam has facilitated women's discussion groups as a key instrument of empowerment. Women seed producers in these groups have gained confidence, access to information, and collective voice on their priority issues. For the first time, women report, they realized that their voices could be heard in a public space. Groups have successfully taken on issues ranging from latrine construction through training on new seed varieties to polygamy. Norms are often tough to challenge, so a facilitator- leader supports the group in 'being heard'.

In Tanzania, a TV programme was aired daily, which heightened the profile the work of women farmers in the search for a 'female food hero'. The public voted by cell-phone text message, and their votes were combined with feedback from facilitators who had worked with the women over the past few weeks. Finalists went through training on issues ranging from land rights and marketing to HIV and AIDS. This innovative approach allowed viewers to explore the unique challenges that women face in becoming farmers, and millions of viewers watched as Sister Martha Mwasu Waziri challenged the image of farming as a male role and was crowned Mama Shujaa wa Chakula (Female Food Hero) 2012. Both these strategies are being replicated in other countries.

ACTIONS TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Meaningful economic empowerment for women in agriculture and agribusiness goes beyond increasing women's market participation. Actions must address the risks of creating additional time pressures, of increased vulnerability to abuse for women or of concentrating women in low-paid, precarious work. It is therefore critical to address the structural barriers to women's economic empowerment through holistic approaches which support women's voices and rights and challenge negative social norms. Job creation for women must be accompanied by employment safeguards and social infrastructure to ensure that this leads to positive opportunities. Stepping up action on women's economic empowerment in agriculture is particularly important given a reduction in government support over recent decades and the high levels of women's engagement in the sector.

Companies should first know where women are in their value chains, to be able to approach economic empowerment systematically. They should set the vision for the entire chain, using their influence for broader change, not just driving change in their own business. Specifically, they should take responsibility for ending the gender pay gap, improve access to decent employment opportunities for women and help to reduce the burden of caring for children and elderly relatives. Companies should systematically collect information on the roles women play and the barriers they face across regions and commodities, while adopting processes to ensure gender opportunities and violations are raised and addressed with suppliers.

Governments should implement the necessary policy legislation and regulation to promote women's rights and economic empowerment. This should promote equal pay, decent work, and access to

credit, promote equal inheritance and land rights, and promote positive social norms and attitudes for women. Agricultural policy should be responsive to the crops that women grow, ensure women's access to training, finance, and appropriate technology and extension services. Governments should involve women's organisations and leaders in key decision-making processes and take action to recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care. For women to fully benefit from economic opportunities, Governments should scale their investment in publicly provided universal health, education and social protection.

Civil society organizations should take an innovative approach to holistic programmes, working with a range of actors to jointly create solutions or challenge poor practice and lack of action on women's economic empowerment in agriculture. This includes developing effective monitoring and measurement tools, and ensuring that learning on effective strategies to integrate women's employment alongside interventions addressing structural and social barriers is shared more broadly.

In this context, women's collective action should be supported by governments and by the private sector to give women a voice in their communities and in market governance.

NOTE

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- 2 Lawrence Haddad's review of the evidence entitled 'empowered women raise healthier children'. <http://www.ifpri.org/blog/gender-equality>
- 3 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that human rights apply to all people equally, 'without distinction of any kind such as race, color, sex, language...or any other status'. This means that where women do not enjoy rights equally to men – the right to work, rights at work, right to health or education, this is a violation of their human rights. Human rights standards are concerned with the pursuit of substantive equality, rather than just formal equality. This is explicit in the approach of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, passed by the United Nations in 1979, and ratified by 188 countries.
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- 6 Dalberg and ICEW (2014) 'The Business Case for Women's Economic Empowerment: An Integrated Approach'. http://dalberg.com/documents/Business_Case_for_Womens_Economic_Empowerment.pdf
- 7 <http://www.behindthebrands.org/en/campaign-news/women-cocoa-roadmap>
- 8 Women's well-being depends on their agency, capabilities and entitlements. For a detailed discussion of well-being in developing countries see Sarah C. White (2009) Bringing Wellbeing into Development Practice http://www.welldev.org.uk/wed-new/workingpapers/workingpapers/WeDWP_09_50.pdf
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thalia Kidder is the senior adviser on women's economic rights for Oxfam GB. David Bright is head of economic justice programming for Oxfam GB and coordinates across Oxfam International. Caroline Green is the gender policy adviser for Oxfam GB. Oxfam would like to thank Alan Doran, Sloane Hamilton, Moreen Majiwa, Adriana Rodriguez, Julie Theroux-Seguin, Hector Ortega and Rachel Wilshaw for their contributions to the paper and in developing case studies based on innovative programmes and studies in Bangladesh, Colombia, Honduras, Kenya, Morocco, Nepal and Tanzania. We would also like to acknowledge the support of Linda Scott, Robin Willoughby, Emily brown, Ines Smyth, Erinch Sahan, Max Lawson and Ruth Rennie in finalizing the report.

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78077-742-9 in October 2014.
Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

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