

Realising gender in agricultural policies: The fight for equality is not over

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‘One of the most important messages in support of gender equality in the World Development Report 2008 is its position that challenging gender inequality and investing in addressing the barriers that women face ... will increase efficiency and productivity in the agricultural sector and thereby contribute towards growth and poverty reduction.’

More than two decades separate two major *World Development Reports* on rural agriculture: 1982’s report on ‘Agriculture and Economic Development’ and the 2008 report ‘Agriculture for Development’. During this time, there has not only been a marked shift in the way in which the agricultural sector has been addressed within international policy, but there have been radical changes in the way that women’s roles in development, particularly in rural development and agriculture, have been perceived, analysed and addressed.

The case for gender equality has been strengthened over the years by research and advocacy that have informed international and national policy debates. Economist Ester Boserup’s work on women in agriculture in the 1970s and 1980s was pivotal in its analysis and recognition that women were not merely passive in the development process, but that their reproductive and productive roles were necessary for poverty reduction and growth.

However, despite key efforts to put gender equality at the heart of development policy making, such as the 1995 UN Beijing Conference on Women, some experts are worried that the world has reached a state of gender fatigue¹. Comparing how gender equality is analysed in the recently published 2008 report to the 1982 report indicates that much progress has been made. Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in the 2008 report, clearly showing that there is still much work to do to ensure that rigorous gender analysis becomes central to rural development policy making.

The emerging gender movement in the 1980s
The 1982 report focuses on agriculture in the context of increasing inequality and stymied growth for many low-income countries. Agricultural productivity, including investment in small farmers, is acknowledged as one of the most important means to get a country on the

path of growth and out of poverty.

Given that the ‘women in development’ movement was a fledgling one in the early 1980s, the report’s limited analysis of the role of women in agricultural development and productivity as smallholder farmers is not surprising. References to women are mainly in relation to welfare, and women’s work is seen as mainly reproductive and unchanging.

However, the report does provide a glimpse of Boserup’s emerging economic equity argument. It recognises, albeit to a small extent, that women’s contribution to productivity is a necessary complementary component for supporting agricultural growth.

The report acknowledges that in some societies, women are the primary producers of food. In such situations, it is noted that no effort to improve productivity could succeed, except by the direct involvement of women in agricultural programmes to maximise their productivity as farmers. It also recognises that extension services were biased towards working with men and neglected the very important role of women in agricultural production.

The 1982 report makes a small acknowledgement of changing gender relations, and shows how improved infrastructure enabled both the expansion of non-farm enterprises such as shops but also the transformation of attitudes, customs and values. These changes could enlarge women’s roles by introducing new ideas, education, medical care and economic alternatives to maize cultivation. In particular, they gave women the opportunity to marry later, have fewer children and pursue more non-domestic activities.

Progress made by 2008

Making agriculture more effective for development is a key concern for the 2008 report. It suggests that in order to achieve this, differentiated policies should be defined better to serve each category of household by enhancing: small-

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‘the report is not clear on how economic programming targeted at overcoming gender discrimination can be linked to more strategic political movements for gender equality.’



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holder competitiveness; smallholder market entry; subsistence livelihoods; and skilled occupations.

The report offers a significantly improved review and analysis of how gender inequality interacts with poverty and with agricultural productivity and growth compared to the report of 1982.

First, it identifies changing gender roles and division of labour in the context of emerging employment opportunities and, to some extent, changes in demography and household structure as a result of migration. Women’s roles in the labour force has changed substantially in low-income countries, not only in terms of increased numbers of women working in paid employment, but also in the types of jobs they do. The 2008 report also identifies that whilst growth potential is emerging in the dynamic labour intensive high-value crop sector, for many, wage labour in agriculture is characterised by low wages, seasonal work, and difficult labour conditions for mostly unskilled workers. In many countries, it is women who make up the larger share of the workforce in agriculture – employment that is seasonal and casual, leading to lower wages and precarious livelihoods.

Second, the report offers a better understanding of the gender-specific barriers to engaging in higher return activities, as well as explanations as to why productivity and growth itself is hindered by gender inequality. Certainly, one of the most important messages in support of gender equality is the report’s position that challenging gender inequality and investing in addressing the barriers which women face, even through interventions such as positive discrimination, will increase efficiency and productivity in the agricultural sector and thereby contribute towards growth and poverty reduction. The report presents a strong argument that women’s lack of rights over access to and ownership of assets has a negative impact on agricultural productivity. Rights are also critical for women’s bargaining power within the household, their broader economic opportunities, and their long-term security in case of divorce or death of family members.

Gaps in the debate

For all its merits, there are also substantial areas in the 2008 report that lack important gender analysis. The report focuses very little on the impacts and implications for the global economy, such as the impact of deregulated and liberalised economic policies, and global agricultural trade markets, on gender equality and subsequently, for growth and poverty reduction. Furthermore, it does not fully exploit the link between welfare and social well-being and equality at large, which have longer-term implications for growth.

The report also lacks a rigorous analysis of some key gender-specific constraints – for example, women’s reproductive responsibilities or cultural barriers – when identifying mechanisms for increasing the role of efficient and equitable labour markets in

enabling agricultural growth and poverty reduction. Furthermore, at both the household and community level, the 2008 report does not discuss the economic constraints to improving women’s participation in farmers’ organisations or community committees. The underlying assumption is that women’s labour is elastic, women can absorb increased responsibilities infinitely, and their reproductive work is seen as having little or no economic value.

Just as the gender equality and development movement has taken significant strides since the early 1980s, so the *World Development Report* in 2008 has moved on significantly from the 1982 report in terms of its gender analysis and recognition of the changing role of women in agricultural development. However, a crucial question arising from the 2008 report is how far a gender and agriculture agenda can be sustained through a period of both political and economic change.

The report provides a partial roadmap for changing gender relations in the economic sphere but, whilst it is clear on the importance of political empowerment and participation, the policy options for addressing deeper rooted structural and social inequality are less obvious. This is perhaps not surprising, given the operating parameters of the World Bank – either in its operational lending or policy and research divisions. It is clear that getting women into labour markets, increasing their participation in producer organisations and subsequently in policy and decision-making will all be critical, but the ways in which economic programming targeted at overcoming gender discrimination can be linked to more strategic political movements for gender equality is less clear.

The struggle ahead is to find a balance between using our knowledge on gender to challenge mainstream policy positions of major agencies on the one hand, versus effectively providing evidence, analysis and messages that key policy-makers and implementers can incorporate into their policies, programmes and projects on the other.

Endnotes

1. Jones, N. (2007) *Gender Fatigue: What can we do to overcome it?* ODI Blog. Accessed at: <http://blogs.odi.org.uk/blogs/main/archive/2007/03/07/1760.aspx>

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