



Gender Equality in Rural Advisory Services



This brief explains the concept of gender equality in advisory services and discusses the opportunities that gender equality in rural advisory services can create for global and local food production, women's economic empowerment, household food security, and nutrition. It summarises experiences of how gender equality can be pursued in advisory services and provides some practical examples.

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Background

During recent years there has been increased global attention to women's equal economic opportunities. Women's roles in agricultural production are a central aspect of this, as well as the perspective of improving food and nutritional security for poor families. Women's equal access to rural advisory services is therefore crucial.

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What is gender equality in rural advisory services?

Gender equality is a human right by men and women, boys and girls to equal access to resources, opportunities, and protection. This also means equal entitlements by men and women in civil and political life.

Currently, there are serious inequalities between men and women in access

to and control of assets, information, organisations, and markets in the agricultural sector. This includes access to and control of rural services.

Gender equality in rural advisory services is therefore defined as policies, institutional arrangements, and practices of rural advisory services that increase women's agency and position with regard to sustainable livelihoods. This means that rural advisory services effectively address the inequalities between men and women in access to and control of assets, technologies, information, organisations, and markets.

The expected end result of sustainable change towards gender equality is that both women and men can contribute, give feedback, and generate new knowledge.



Why is gender equality important in rural advisory services?

Considering women's immense importance in agriculture on the one hand and agriculture's strong importance for women's livelihoods on the other, it is clear that increasing gender equality in rural advisory services can make important contributions to a more fair play-

ing field for men and women, providing women with their rightful possibilities for benefiting from economic opportunities in the agricultural sector.

The Agricultural Support Programme (ASP) in Zambia supported by Sida showed that equal access to advisory services made female-headed households progress relatively more than male-headed households (78% versus 31% increase in income respectively).

It is also clear that equal opportunities for men and women are an important precondition for increasing productivity in smallholder farming in most developing countries. There are at the same time great opportunities for achieving other important goals of supporting vulnerable livelihoods, reducing poverty and malnutrition and increasing food production.

Equal access by women to well-targeted advisory services strengthens their knowledge, skills, and innovative capacity in their farming enterprises. With the right approach, this can also facilitate and strengthen women's participation in rural organisations, including their representation and leadership. Including services such as legal information and advice in rural advisory services furthermore strengthens women's property rights and land tenure security, which

will ultimately increase women's interest and incentives to invest in agriculture.

Moreover, women's access to effective extension services that address issues of nutrition can play a strong role in improving nutritional status of families, through increasing knowledge about nutrition and promoting farming systems that are oriented towards improved and sustainable food production.

Reducing inequalities will increase productivity and outputs from women's



farming activities. In FAO's State of Food and Agriculture 2010–2011 it was estimated that if women have equal access to productive resources and services, they can increase yields on their farms by 20–30%, which will raise total agricultural output in developing countries by up to 4% and reduce the number of undernourished people in the world by 12–17%. As examples, the report presents calculations from Malawi and Ghana, showing that equal access to inputs and services would increase maize yields alone by 17%.



How can gender equality be achieved?

Sustainable change towards gender equality in advisory services means confronting and addressing both structural inequalities in society, and the gender biases inside advisory service organisations.

To address gender biases within advisory service organisations, these must be reoriented towards greater responsiveness and accountability to women's aspirations and needs. This can be pursued through developing organisational policies and structures that ensure equal representation of men and women in decision making, along with governance practices that empower women – for example through gender sensitisa-

tion of leaders and leadership training of women leaders.

There are two aspects: One is to reorient the governance systems to strengthen women farmers' ownership and control of their organisations and of advisory services. The other is to embrace and increase the number of women professionals as employees at all levels of the institution and also the organisational functioning and culture.

Strengthen women's ownership and control

Women's participation in organisations and leadership must be strengthened to enhance the responsiveness of advisory services to women. This will moreover strengthen rural women's social and political capital in society, which is crucial for addressing inequalities related to power and rights to land and other resources.

Women are typically engaged in other types of agricultural activities than men. Success therefore requires that the supply of services matches with women's needs. The proper matching is partly linked to representation of women in decision making in the institutions and partly to reorienting rural advisory systems and practices – from being supply-driven to be driven by demand.

However, orienting the services towards responding to women's demands also



requires a decentralised and transparent planning and budgeting process, which ensures that the training and advice responding to women's demands are actually planned and budgeted for.

In the case of the ASP in Zambia mentioned above, a strong factor for success was the fact that the planning and budgeting happened at the local level and was combined with a procedure for demand formulation at the farmer group level, which together were translated into service planning and budgeting at the district level.

There are positive experiences of building women's organisations at grassroots

and higher levels. Programmes and services that target women in groups have greater potential to address gender relations within households and society, whereby they better address women's strategic needs than programmes targeting individuals. Depending on the cultural context, this may be through facilitation of particular women's organisations or through promoting women's representation in farmer organisations or community-based organisations.

Increase the number of women professionals

Most experience finds that professional women advisors are strategic for reaching women farmers with services. Therefore, gender equality in rural advisory services also means gender equal-

ity within the advisory organisations – having an equal representation of men and women as professional advisors.

For many organisations this will require:

- Adjusting recruitment criteria – in some cases gender quotas can be considered
- Providing gender-sensitive work conditions
- Promoting gender sensitivity with both male and female agents

Equal recruitment of men and women will require building capacity of female staff, both through formal education and through upgrading opportunities. There are a number of constraints related to attracting women candidates into natural sciences, and into advisory services in particular. It can be difficult to maintain women in the often highly male-dominated professional environment. Experiences show that a combination of targeted sponsorship, crash training programmes for upgrading, and intensive mentorship by other women champions can yield positive results.

There are strong barriers for rural advisory services being attractive as an occupation, especially for women. Experience from countries in Africa that have progressed in this area (such as Malawi and Kenya) shows that the barriers can be broken by pioneers, but for this to be up-scaled, incentives for female staff must be developed. This includes providing a safe and gender-sensitive working environment with strong policies for fighting discrimination and sexual harassment, and consideration of the reproductive roles of women through practices such as paid maternity leave and workplace design (e.g. possibilities for breastfeeding and childcare units attached to the place of work).

In some cases direct financial incentives for women may be required. In challenging areas of Bangladesh, some non-governmental organisations have had good results in terms of recruiting and maintaining female staff for fieldwork by using financial incentives and in some cases even employing married couples that can move together in the client communities.

In exceptionally hostile environments or violent conflict areas particular precautions must be taken to protect the safety of the women staff as they operate in rural areas.



Gender sensitive approaches and practices

Some approaches and practises at field level are more effective in reaching women than others. Particularly effective approaches and practises are:

- Participatory, demand-driven approaches ensure the services and their content are relevant to women clients
- Group-based approaches are often preferred by women and have potential to contribute to empowerment of women
- Household approaches can ensure that both men and women in the families are involved
- Methodologies that focus on education and capacity development can assist in closing gender gaps in knowledge and skills
- Gender-sensitive delivery systems that, for example, adjust schedules to women's schedules of work and consider the heavy workload of women, e.g., using ICTs such as radio that can be combined with daily work at home
- Services that address issues of power and rights of women, such as legal advice or facilitation of negotiations in family and society
- Effective monitoring and evaluation can enhance the learning of both rural advisory service providers and clients, as well of accountability towards the clients.

Experiences show that combining participatory or demand-driven approaches with group-based approaches such as farmer field schools and farmer study circles are often successful in reaching rural women. The strong preference women have for these approaches is likely due to the fact that the groups make their own choice of content and topics and plan their own study schedule. The content can be moulded to the women farmer's needs and involve experience sharing and experiments between the group members in their practical life.

It is hoped that by paying attention to the concepts and practices presented here, rural advisory service providers and other stakeholders will make advisory services more equitable so that they can reach an important group of producers – women farmers, whereby – as evidence has shown – the services will be more efficient and effective in contributing to improving food security.



For further reading

Assisi Statement on Agricultural Advisory Services Worldwide

(<http://www.g-fras.org/resources/statements-on-ras/>)

Birner, R. et al. 2009. From Best Practice to Best Fit: A Framework for Designing and Analyzing Agricultural Advisory Services Worldwide. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute.

(<http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/rb04.pdf>).

Christoplos, I. 2010. Mobilizing the potential of rural and agricultural extension. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services. Rome: FAO.



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