



**64<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission of the Status of Women  
Statement of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)  
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Excellencies, ladies, gentlemen, colleagues and friends

It is a pleasure to address you on the one-hundredth commemoration of International Women's Day. A date to celebrate on unprecedented achievements in the status of women, and also a date to reflect.

Many of the achievements that urban women take for granted are close to unknown for many of the rural women of the world even after one hundred years of bringing the issues of women's rights to the attention of the international political agenda in days like today.

Development initiatives continue to have an urban bias even if the vast majority of the population of poorer countries lives in the rural areas and the vast majority of the poorest women are rural.

Agriculture constitutes the basis of the livelihoods of rural people. However, it faced a continuous decrease in investments and in international development assistance until the world food crisis showed the cost of letting it become invisible to public agendas.

FAO studies showed that the groups more affected by the food crisis were three: the urban poor, the rural net food buyers and female headed households across the board, both urban and rural.

Female headed households suffered relatively more welfare losses than male headed households because they tend to spend a higher proportion of their income on food, regardless of educational and income level, and because they have less access to land and to other essential agricultural inputs. The food crisis demonstrated that women's equal access to resources is not only a moral imperative, but that it is essential for reducing a country's vulnerability to food insecurity. Women's equal access to resources is also essential for reducing national poverty levels. Without women's economic empowerment and a focus on rural women, MDG 1 cannot be achieved.

Gender disparities in land access remain significant in most countries, regardless of their level of development. A new FAO database helps to understand the factors that prevent women from accessing land, and to design better policies to effectively address this situation.

Land provides rural households the basic means for subsistence and market production. It offers a secure base on which to shelter and nurture families and develop livelihood strategies. Even in countries where rural income has become less dependent on agriculture, land continues to be an essential resource for rural populations.

Gender inequalities in land rights are pervasive. Not only do women have lower access to land than men. They are often also restricted to so-called secondary land rights, meaning that they hold these rights through male family members. Women thus risk losing entitlements in case of divorce, widowhood or their husband's migration. Evidence also shows that women's parcels are generally of smaller size and lower quality.

An international comparison of agricultural census data shows that less than 20% of landholders are women. The situation is particularly grim in Western and Central Africa as well as the Near East and North Africa where generally less than 10% of landholders are women. Numbers are only slightly higher in Asia. In Eastern and Southern Africa and in parts of Latin America, women seem to have somewhat better access to land. In some countries up to 30% of individual land titles are held by women.

Only in a few countries land is almost equally divided between women and men. Latvia and Lithuania top the list with more than 45% of land titles being held by women. Women's low access to land thus prevails across countries with different social, cultural and economic backgrounds. Indeed, differences are often greater within regions than between them.

Since the 1990s, several land distribution and titling programmes have tried to increase women's access to land. However, the success of these initiatives has been limited. Analysis shows that a lack of adequate enforcement mechanisms has hampered many of the laws and provisions that could benefit women. In addition, enforcement needs to be coupled with broader efforts to increase the support of reforms, for example by raising awareness among the population and targeting specific stakeholders such as village chiefs. A number of countries still have dispositions in their national Civil Codes, Family Codes and Labour Codes that discriminate against women, regardless of equality provisions in the Constitution.

In some African countries the Constitution prohibits gender discrimination, but recognizes exceptions in issues relating to marriage, divorce and inheritance where customary law is applied. Contradictions also exist in many Asian countries, especially those where the population belongs to different ethnic and religious groups. In populations that apply Hindu Personal Law, for example, married daughters without male offspring cannot inherit.

In Latin America, legal provisions to recognize gender equality in land rights have been in place for more than 30 years. Yet, socio-cultural traditions continue to influence the way in which the law is interpreted and applied. In many countries women have experienced difficulties in jointly registering land with their husbands.

Policy makers need to address the multiple layers that impede gender equality in land rights. The new FAO Gender and Land Rights Database helps to better understand the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of women's access to land, which is crucial to design better policies. The following considerations seem key:

- Women's access to land can be increased if the gender dimension is considered in the early stages of a reform programme. Involving a large range of stakeholders can secure the necessary level of support. Sensitizing land administration officers, informing the public and mobilizing civil society organizations all promise to facilitate the reform process. Improving the production and availability of sex disaggregated data is an important step in this regard.
- Complexities in land reforms and administrations as well as discrepancies between constitutional, statutory and customary law. These need to be addressed if women's rights to land are to be protected and access improved.

- Improving women's education, their knowledge of legal matters and their voice can contribute to raising women's access to land. Another strategy is to increase women's representation within land administration institutions, such as titling and registration agencies as well as village councils. Sensitizing land courts, the media and decentralized government authorities about the importance of women's land rights will be equally important. Affirmative action may be required to counteract the effect of discriminatory social norms and practices.

Increasing women's access to land can be a powerful tool to fight poverty and hunger. However, supporting measures need to ensure that women also have the capacities to effectively use the land. Efforts to improve access to other resources, such as financial, technological and extension services as well as markets are therefore important complements to any reform programme.

Policy action is urgently needed, especially considering that gender disparities in land access are unlikely to disappear within the existing legal, institutional, social and cultural framework and under current economic trends. In fact, the commercialization of agriculture risks excluding women further as it reinforces land tenure concentration, which usually favours male heads of larger farm households.

Chairperson,

For more than 60 years, FAO has been working on reducing gender disparities in access to land and other productive resources, in voice and in decision making in the rural areas of the world. We have obtained considerable success in gender sensitive policy making in agriculture, capacity building of the agricultural sector to address gender disparities, gender disaggregated data including from agricultural censuses to feed into the policy making process. However, substantial challenges remain.

As we face the combined effects of the food crisis, the economic and financial crisis and the cumulative effects of climate change, it becomes more evident that the world will not be able to achieve MDG 1 nor, in fact any of the MDGs, without the empowerment of rural women, and without giving a prominent place the development agenda to investment in agriculture and agricultural livelihoods.

This year's State of Food and Agriculture, FAO's flagship publication, will be on gender and agriculture. We hope that it will make an effective contribution for governments and the international community to address gender issues and therefore to reach development goals more effectively and sustainably.

Thank you for your attention

