

# Relevance and feasibility of women's involvement in promoting sustainable food production and security in Southern Africa

## Relevância e Factibilidade do Envolvimento das Mulheres na Promoção da Produção e da Segurança Alimentar no Sul da África

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### ABSTRACT

Harnessing women's potential for food production and food security has been a challenge in Southern Africa. The face of food production in Southern Africa is often female, but more often than not, their roles are generally undervalued and constrained by gender inequalities and limitations on their access to resources, services, and market opportunities. There is a tendency of men and women participating unevenly in food production, having unequal access to productive resources and exhibiting different levels of engagement in rural, urban and home-based food production. Despite of this, there is still a common understanding that food production needs to be increased in order to cope with the increased human population levels and achieving food security in the region. With this in mind, food production and security have emerged as key development targets in Southern Africa. This has propelled the urgent need for promoting food production, reducing food insecurity and poverty reduction in its totality. This essay attempts to describe the impact of gender-based discrimination on food production and its implication on food security. The indispensable role and challenges faced by women in food production are highlighted. The need to invest in education and training of women to support food production systems in order to accrue maximum benefit is acknowledged. In this regard, this essay concludes that it is imperative that planning and implementation of any food production programs focusing on improving food security should be based on gender sensitive policies.

**Keywords:** Women, Food Production, Food Security, and Southern Africa



## 1 INTRODUCTION

Despite its huge agricultural potential consisting of large expanses of unexploited agricultural land, forests and rivers, Southern Africa remains one of the poorest regions in the world and suffers from perpetual chronic food deficits. The outcome of a regional food assessment for Southern Africa, indicates that food insecurity has been growing rather than declining, especially for women and children who are most vulnerable to decreasing agricultural productivity (AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK, 2011). One of the major reasons for this food capacity decline and insecurity is discrimination against women in food production related issues (FAO, 2011). Gittinger et al., (1987) described food security as a function of all factors affecting the maintenance and improvement of per capita food consumption, particularly in poorest countries, including food production, income generation and the capacity to earn foreign exchange. Food security exists when all people have permanent physical and economic access to enough safe and nutritious food to satisfy their energy needs and food preferences and to lead an active and healthy life (WORLD FOOD SUMMIT, 1996). Gender discrimination and the gender gap in food production in particular, thwarting attainment of food security goals is a key concern given the vital role of women as major players of household and community food and nutrition security (FAO, 1996). Women's lack of equal opportunities than men in food production makes Southern Africa continue to lag behind in food security, while the rest of the world has made significant progress in this regard (MWANIKI, 1994).

There is a tendency of men and women participating unevenly in food production, having unequal access to productive resources and exhibiting different levels of engagement in food production. Women's responsibilities in food production have often been underestimated and their work in this area is still not sufficiently visible. Elsewhere, an increase in food security as a consequence of women involvement in food production has been acknowledged (ADAMS, 2006), and where women have been discriminated the outcome has been food insecurity (FENT, 2012). On the other hand, gender equality has been cited as the single most important determinant of food security (FAO, 1999).

However, in Southern Africa the critical role of women in food production has been compromised due to the fact that there has been limited access to land and capital, credit, agricultural inputs, education and appropriate technology etc. (AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK, 2013). This means advancing policies which address the issue of women discrimination in land ownership and tenure, where women are denied access to and control of land and other productive resources will fulfil women's potential as food producers and improve food security. The overall purpose of this essay was to explore the linkages between food production and security and gender inequity from the perspective of women in Southern Africa. The following topics are explored: i) gender role differences in food production and security; ii) women's access to productive resources; iii) women's training and education for sustainable food production; iv) women's involvement in micro-livestock farming;

v) the role of technology and infrastructure, and vi) empowering women through policy making. The discussion concludes that, while equality of treatment between women and men, and food security are mutually supportive, gender equality remains an elusive goal in Southern Africa. As a consequence, the promotion of gender sensitive policies is urgently needed.

## 2 GENDER ROLE DIFFERENCES IN FOOD PRODUCTION AND SECURITY

Women's play a critical role in food production, contributing to ensure food security and nutrition in Southern Africa. David Kauck (2010) explains that to make a significant dent in chronic hunger and jump-start economic growth, global food security strategies must address the underlying social inequities between women and men. Gender inequality, which undermines food production, is a product of a series of interrelated social, economic and cultural factors. On the other hand, the economic, social and cultural constraints faced by women hinder them from fulfilling their responsibilities and/or striking the right balance with men when carrying out these responsibilities. Gender inequality cannot be an afterthought to our food security strategies in Southern Africa, it must be the linchpin. One reason that Southern Africa food security strategies continue to fall short is that they do not appreciate the on-the-ground realities of gender role differences in food production and security. Food production programs risk failure when they don't consider the social realities of gender – that is, the distinct roles and norms assigned to women and men in a society. Gender-differentiated food production knowledge plays a decisive role in food security. Women can increasingly become important as food producers only if agrarian processes are gendered in nature. In other words, gender equality can make a substantial contribution to a country's food production and economic growth (ABU-GHAIDA; KLASSEN, 2004), and it is the single most important determinant of food security (WORLD BANK, 2012). Despite this acknowledgement, many agricultural programs struggle to capture the difference—or the 'gender effect'—that gender integration makes on key outputs and outcomes in food production (KANETHASAN *et al.*, 2013). The recognition of women's indispensable role in food production may result in maximum benefits being accrued in food programs. One theme running through a number of the quantitative studies on women's involvement in food production is that once gender differentials in programs characteristics are taken into account, they do not face any further gender-related obstacles in succeeding (BARDASI *et al.*, 2007). Accordingly, food production policies should not be gender blind but should appreciate gender needs of men and women to seek to facilitate more gender equitable opportunities. At the same time, a narrow focus on differences between men and women may mask more important differences among women leading to the flawed assumption that all women have identical resources to draw upon and, hence, the ineffective targeting of interventions in food security issues (QUISUMBING; PANDOLFELLI, 2012). It should be acknowledged that women and men's expenditure patterns differ, with women spending more of their income on the household food needs, in particular, on children (PAXTON, 2009).





### 3 IMPROVING WOMEN'S ACCESS TO PRODUCTIVE RESOURCES

Discrimination against women on productive resources has far-reaching implications for food production and security. Women face gender disparities in access to and control over land, as well as lack of access to other productive resources and services. The absence of legislation and security for women concerning land tenure is one of the most serious obstacles to increased farm production and higher incomes for rural women. Unequal access to land is also an obstacle to increasing food production and incomes of rural women. FAO (1994) cites limited access to resources as one of the main reasons that women are unable to better contribute to food security, and recognize that the causes of this stem from a series of inter-related social, economic and cultural factors. To a large extent, constraints in access to land cannot be dissociated from access to other productive resources that can augment women's productivity — *i.e.*, credit, inputs such as high-quality varieties of seeds can augment farmers', farming equipment, and extension services. The failure to acknowledge that women are already engaged in farming and seeking ways in which to increase their production and earnings has made the situation worse. Closing the gender gap in access to productive resources such as land, credit, machinery or chemicals could eliminate yield gaps of 20% to 30% among women and men, increase domestic agricultural output by 2.5% to 4%, and mean up to 100 million fewer people living in hunger (FAO, 1994). Observation has been made that when women obtain the same farm inputs as average male farmers, they increase their yields for maize, beans and cowpeas by 22 per cent (IFPRI, 2004), which may mean that gender constitutes the most profound differentiating division in food production. When women received the same education and similar inputs and assistance as men, overall farm yields could rise by as much as 22 per cent (FAO WOMEN AND POPULATION DIVISION, 2007). Women's productive capacity or opportunities are limited by entrenched customs and legal barriers in many parts of Southern Africa, which may result in restriction on their ownership of land (MCFERSON, 2008). Corrective measures on legal barriers and customary norms will have a profound implication on food production. Land provides financial security, food security, and can be an important asset in the case of emergency (DENTON, 2002). In many cases, women have access to land, but limited control over it, since they do not own it and cannot make decisions on its use. Limited land ownership means diminished rights to productive means, limited access to safety nets and reduced economic security.

### 4 PRIOTIZING WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Women's access to education and training opportunities reduces the likelihood of household poverty (KABEER, 2012), and resources in educated women's hands have a range of positive outcomes for human capital and capabilities within the household. Women training in food production are an important tool, which can be widely utilized in solving the problem of food insecurity (GROSS, 1999). Placing an emphasis on gender sensitivity training and the rights of women will pave way for programs that

seek to enhance women equal treatment in food production. A cross-country study of developing countries covering period 1970- 1995 found that 43% of the reduction of hunger that occurred was attributed to progress in women education (VON GERBER *et al.*, 2009). Food production and security requires targeted and deliberate action in the form of comprehensive education and training of women with special focus on the resource poor women who are the majority in most African communities. Training courses, which promoted women's capacity for longer-term planning as well as providing practical skills, reported the greatest impact on intra-household relations and participation in the community (CABER; NOONAN, 2004).

Improving women's access to education alone resulted in a 43 per cent reduction in hunger from 1970 to 1995, while women living longer led to an additional 12 per cent decline in hunger levels, according to the report by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 1994). In spite of those facts, gender stereotypes still abound in education decision-making in the study area; in curriculum and teaching materials, and in the choice of training subjects.

The need to set up community-based training programs for women with well defined goals should be one of the future priorities to alleviate poverty and food security. Such forum provides a space for women to share knowledge and experiences in addressing gender within their work, creating a sustainable platform for technical support, problem-solving and new ideas on gender and food production (KANESATHASAN *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, acquiring higher education levels will translate into a decline of fertility levels and improved opportunities for girls and women in the work market (GALOR; WEIL, 1996). Education and training should promote the sharing of expertise with outside experts but at the same time balancing this with local personnel with good knowledge of women's skills and potential in food production. Before embarking upon a program on training as a priority to support women, systematic courses on planned food production should be identified and women consulted. This should take into account the gender differences and participation of women in different agricultural ventures such as subsistence farming to modern commercial crop and livestock farming. Most Southern African countries have agro-based economies and training in food production at all levels should be aimed at developing women who are the majority for making a living out of agriculture and working in improving household food and support their communities at large. It is logical to assume that training in broad based key factors in food production will increase production and meets the local food demands.

As we will discuss in the following item, there is also an urgent need to broaden any academic curriculum in order to include productive alternatives, such as the breeding of mini-livestock species and innovative biotechnology methods. The integration of such issues into the curricula of food production is lacking at tertiary level in most developing countries, including African countries.





## 5 WOMEN INVOLVEMENT IN MICROLIVESTOCK FARMING

Livestock production is frequently out of reach for the large majority of people in Southern Africa. The inadequate provision of livestock products is likely to have an undesirable impact on the health and nutrition of the regions' population, mainly due to the lack of proteins. Considerable exploitation of lesser known livestock species, otherwise known as *micro livestock*, as likely sources of animal protein may be just as important to meet the population's chronic protein deficit. Micro livestock farming should act as a practical strategy for increasing women's benefits from livestock value chain in improving household food, income and nutrition security. Micro livestock can be referred to inherently small animal species by nature, which are traditionally favoured type of livestock. The class encompasses small indigenous vertebrates and invertebrates both domesticated and wild genetic animal resources that can be produced on sustainable basis for food, animal feeding and even as a source of income. The indispensable role of micro livestock in enhancing the food security of vulnerable households by filling in the deficit gaps through purchases from micro livestock income, contribution to dietary diversity, and the use of micro livestock products in household diets is unquestionable. By micro livestock we mean poultry, rabbits, bush rodents, bees, snails, guinea pigs, reptiles such as snakes, and birds which have been recently considered as eligible for micro livestock (HARDOUIN *et al.*, 2003). The biodiversity of Southern Africa's micro livestock provides a valuable asset and sustainable resource for improvement of food production and security. Livestock contribute a significant part of their livelihoods Southern Africa. In addition to providing food for their families, women's livestock production often represents one of the few sources of income over which they have complete control. Studies show that, because poor, rural women spend almost all of their income on food for their families, increasing poultry and small animal production does more to improve the diets of poor people than expanding cattle herds does.

As in other agricultural sectors, men and women usually have distinct roles in managing livestock. Commonly, men own the conventional large livestock, using them to work the fields. But women often do most of the work of feeding, caring and milking these animals. In addition, women frequently have sole responsibility for raising smaller, short-cycled animals, such as goats, pigs and poultry. Micro livestock have a host of benefits and opportunities that conventional livestock do not present for women farmers. Micro livestock production may bring considerable economic potential to women due to their availability and easy to manage, as well as acting as a vehicle to improved food security. Priority on micro livestock production should be directed on women in order to promote food security through provision of comprehensive support services and incentives. The purpose of micro livestock production should go beyond their direct output functions and include other significant economic and diversification activities, as well as various cultural roles related to status and the obligations of their owner.

## 6 APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Technological innovations, if employed appropriately, will continue to allow food production to keep pace with population growth and the rising food demand in Southern Africa. Technology adoption of high yielding crops and high productive livestock has witnessed success in food production. The unbridled use of technology to improve efficiency in food production and ultimately, women's interests is the most effective components of enhancing food production and security. However, in spite of abundant modern technologies and guidelines available from the developed world for use in increasing food production, most of the women who constitute the majority in food production ventures cannot adopt these new innovations. This has resulted in failure to produce enough food for individual households and communities at large. Non-gender sensitive policies have militated against women in adoption of new technologies. State sponsored research institutions should be part of the drive for technological innovation and food production and security. Encouraging women to adopt new technologies is another way to help women in Southern Africa become a bigger force in farming. On station production units may provide the centres for rapid distribution of superior plant food and livestock genotypes through improved technologies, which as Smith (1988) states, are area model for the role of sophisticated technology in improving livestock breeds and developing food production systems. The results of new developments in reproductive physiology which makes various manipulations possible opens up entirely new horizons for livestock and crop genetic resources improvement. New technology can achieve improvement through selection of foundation livestock and crop populations and attain faster and more effective performance improvement rates in both crops and livestock genetic resources. Technology based schemes offer effective options to maintain and improve crops and livestock if well functioning infrastructure and capital are provided to women. The introduction of biotechnological techniques such as crop and livestock gene banks would be ideal but unrealistic under the current constraints of developing countries. Women may benefit as technological advances reduce unit costs of production and hence increase profits. However, the existing research facilities fall far short of what is required for livestock and crop improvement to enhance food security by women. Traditional agricultural research and development systems are not gender-responsive and typically do not consult female farmers and end-users, improved varieties and technologies do not take into account women's needs, preferences and resources (QUISUMBING; PANDOLFELLI, 2012). Establishment of links between public and private sector to support women in food production has been constrained by the inability to economically justify the benefit on such a move by individual countries. Public and private sector partnership in new food production approaches, remain a theoretical possibility considering the lack of appropriate facilities, the extent of inadequate human resource development and expertise. This exacerbated with the absence of formal marketing facilities for crops and livestock has contributed to the persistence of comparatively widespread household food insecurity. Food production in the developed world has advanced to the current stage mainly due to the presence of good infrastructure and joint public and private sector support in food production. While advancement in infrastructure has improved food production

efforts in developed countries, lack of proper infrastructure has hampered food production and perpetuated food insecurity in Southern Africa.

## 7 EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH GENDER SENSITIVE POLICIES

Misguided agricultural and trade policies have contributed to the current food crisis in Southern African countries, including the failure to recognize women's crucial roles in food production and household food security (KARL, 2009). Women constraints to food production often emanate from unfriendly policies, which have compromised their effective participation in food production. Public policies and investment in Southern Africa are often biased against women, inequitable access to land and critical resources and this has perpetuated food insecurity. Policy should emphasize the importance of fostering knowledge exchange amongst women for the maximization of tangible and intangible benefits in food production and enhance food security. Appreciation of gender differences can be enhanced with improved information about the range of inequalities and specific constraints facing women in food production. Despite clear evidence that tackling the gender gap can lead to improved food security, many countries in Southern Africa are failing to promote gender sensitive interventions. A simultaneous and integrated pursuit of such information and transformation is essential for elimination of gender blind strategies, while complementing men and women efforts and maximize their synergy in food production. Access to credit and finance is to be improved through deliberate policies. Marginalized groups - especially women - are to be harnessed in this drive to commercialize food production in both rural and urban areas. Women themselves may also address some of the problems they face by moving towards commercialization through collective farming for example by forming farming cooperatives to gain access to inputs, markets or other services.

It is impossible to redress gender inequalities in the short term, however minimum policy interventions should do no harm, and ideally they should catalyse a change process for ending gender discrimination and securing women's access to key productive resources. Developing gendered policy options and strategies to support food production systems that potentially have the greatest impacts on women is the solution to food insecurity in the region.

## 8 IMPLICATIONS

Acknowledging the crucial role of women in food production is the first step in formulating gender-sensitive policies in response to food shortages amid Southern African countries. Integrating gender dimensions in food production becomes fundamental to achieving food security, because it seeks to minimize social, economic and political barriers to women participation in agricultural production. Existing policies that intentionally and unintentionally reinforce gender discrimination must be addressed. Continued marginalization of women through





negative social values and attitudes explain the food capacity decline in the region. To address embedded gender barriers, there is need to close the gender gap in terms of access to productive resources, education and training, provision of extension services, credit facilities and appropriate technology for women to maximize production. Public investment in education and training should be tailor-made to empower women ensuring their full participation in the mainstream food production systems. The need to set up women's community based food production training programs with well defined goals should be one of the future priorities to achieve food security. Extension services should be gender sensitive - for example, establishing pro-female community-based training and increasing the number of female extension workers.

Food production entails a duality in which activities can be grouped into food production as a commercial activity, and the traditional food production for household consumption. Differentiated strategies and support actions may be required to target women to fully participate in both of these sectors. The planning for future priorities on improved food production should be based on the premise that female farmers are a vast majority in Southern Africa, and can make a rational and effective use of available resources.

The importance of women's engagement in national collaborative networks among public and private institutions is also unquestionable. Food production efficiency will improve when technical, institutional and economic opportunities for women are supported by both public and private sector. Involvement of women in food production programmes can contribute to reduce vulnerability, increase food security and accelerate economic growth in Southern Africa.

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