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Female farming systems

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Abstract

Female farming systems draws attention to women's (re)productive roles in agriculture, with particular attention to questions of power, equity, and empowerment. Female farming systems as an organizing concept highlights what was a surprisingly neglected field of study until the 1970s and provides insights into the gendered nature of agriculture. In the past and the present the term "farmer" presumes a male identity. Globally, women have often been marginalized from farming by denying them access to the material resources needed for success such as land, labor, and capital. Due to a variety of reasons there is a feminization of agriculture underway, and therefore, it remains important to focus on questions of equity and empowerment for women engaged in agriculture. Although originally solely focused on women in low-income countries, female farming systems is now used to think about the varied activities of female food producers in both low- and high-income countries.

Female farming systems is a concept that draws attention to women's (re)productive roles in agriculture with particular attention to questions of power, equity, inclusion, and empowerment. As a concept, female farming systems was originally linked with women in low-income countries (Boserup 1970) and focused solely on women's contributions at the farm-level. More recent scholarship has shifted to the broader concepts of gender and agriculture. Gender, rather than simply women, provides a space for interrogating the ways in which relationships are socially constructed through gender meanings and practices between men and women in diverse locations (Bock 2006). Moreover, more recent gender and agriculture scholarship focuses not only on farm women in both high and low-income countries, but also recognizes women's contributions as extending beyond the agricultural production sphere (e.g.,

processing, retail, consumption). Historically, the term “farmer,” like so many other occupations, presumed a male identity. Yet, from the 1970s to the present, studies reveal the vast and varied activities of female food producers.

From the late 1970s to early 1980s studies highlighting the overlooked and undervalued contributions of women in agriculture in both low- and high-income countries proliferated. Scholars began to raise questions regarding power and inequality within farm households, thereby emphasizing that “women enter and engage in farming through specific kinship relations, as wives, daughters, mothers and widows” (Shortall 2006, 20). From this research there has been growing emphasis on choice, agency, resistance and the altering of gender identities over time (Shortall 2006, 21), although the degree to which each of these topics is emphasized in low-income countries differs from high-income countries. For example, many recent studies focus on the role of women in high-income countries in alternative agricultural movements (e.g., sustainability initiatives), which is much less the case in low-income countries. Despite the shift in the literature to emphasizing agency and resistance among female farmers, the persistence of paternalistic farming structures cross-culturally has been documented, raising further questions about power and equity for female farmers.

In her now classic study, Boserup’s (1970) *Women’s Role in Economic Development* was the first to draw attention to the invisibility of women in agriculture in low-income countries. Boserup challenged the prevailing assumption that while women helped to produce subsistence crops for household consumption they were not involved in agriculture as a productive economic activity. In fact, women make essential economic and non-economic contributions to agricultural economies and rural livelihoods across low-income countries. Nevertheless, many national accounts fail to capture the contributions of women due to the persistent bias of counting work as economically productive only when money is exchanged.

Based on the aggregate data, the FAO (2011) estimates that women in low-income countries comprise approximately 43 percent of the agricultural labor force, and approximately 400 million producers, or two thirds of the world’s poorest livestock keepers, are women. However, this figure hides the enormous variation in women’s participation across and within countries. For example, the aggregate data suggests that women comprise 20 percent of the

agricultural labor force in Latin America and the Caribbean, rising to almost 50 percent in Africa. Quantifying women's contribution to agricultural activities is problematic. In most farm households both men and women are engaged in crop and livestock production, however, the specific roles of women and types of activities in which they engage vary by age, social class, country, and region. Analysts often attempt to calculate output by assuming that women grow specific crops or raise certain kinds of livestock and men others, and then aggregate these values by gender to determine how much is produced by women. Many gender analysts expect that such calculations underestimate the specific roles of women and types of activities in which they are engaged.

While women dominate smallholder and subsistence agricultural production systems and as non-wage farm laborers, especially in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, women also engage as commercial farmers, wage farm workers, traders, and rural entrepreneurs in low-income countries. In fact, women farmers in low-income countries are typically involved in a range of livelihood strategies, including producing crops, caring for livestock, growing, processing, and preparing food, collecting fuel and water, and trading and marketing agricultural products (SOFA Team and Doss 2011). These roles are also changing as social and economic forces transform the agricultural sector in many places. Agriculture is becoming increasingly feminized, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where women are more and more responsible for the farm as men exit from the sector to migrate to urban areas in search of paid work, or as a result of involvement in civil wars and conflicts, or deaths and illnesses from HIV/AIDS. The feminization of agriculture is also occurring due to women being integrated as low-cost, "unskilled," labor into export value chains, such as specialty fruits and vegetables, and cut-flowers (SOFA Team and Doss 2011).

Despite the significant participation of women in agriculture in low-income countries, women's contribution could be even greater. Research shows that farm production levels by women are significantly lower than that of men. These differences are not because women are less skilled, but the result of gender-based inequalities and discrimination that limit women's access to, or control over, key agricultural resources and inputs such as land, labor, credit, seeds, fertilizer, equipment, education, training, and extension services. Women and female-

headed households are also disadvantaged due to lower levels of wealth and education compared with their male counterparts. These disadvantages are even more problematic for the significant share of households headed by women, which, for example, is around 30 percent in Eastern Africa. The FAO (2011) estimates that crop yields could increase by 20–30 percent if women had the same access to resources and inputs that men do and that this increase in agricultural output could reduce the number of undernourished people in the world by 12–17 percent.

Ownership and access to land is a major constraint for women farmers, especially female-headed households. Rates of land ownership by women are much lower than for men. For example, women own only 5 percent of land in Northern Africa and only 15 percent in sub-Saharan Africa (FAO 2011). In many societies, women are discriminated against in both legal and customary land tenure systems where laws and tradition bar women from owning and inheriting land. Over the past decade, many countries in Africa have instituted new laws to strengthen the rights of women to own and inherit land. Nevertheless, even in these countries, the ability of women to exercise their legal rights to land is limited by their lack of knowledge about the laws and the failure of the state to implement and enforce the law. Without the ability to use land as collateral, women are severely disadvantaged in accessing credit, which limits their ability to purchase essential inputs, such as seeds, tools, and fertilizers, or invest in irrigation and land improvements. Such constraints limit female producers' abilities to enhance their incomes and improve household food security.

The roles of women in agriculture in high-income countries may differ from that of women in low-income countries, but the constraints that have limited the opportunities of female producers have many similarities. Not unlike women in the low-income countries, women in the Antipodes, European, and North American farming systems have also historically been marginalized from farming by denying them access to the material resources needed for success such as land, labor, and capital. Land transfer/inheritance practices have historically favored men. For example, until the 1990s, the French legal system conferred rights of ownership, control, and decision-making to male farmers alone, denying women rights to the legal occupational status of farmer and the material resources to engage in farming. The French

government considered farm women as “*sans profession*” (without a profession), and maintained this practice through legal codes. Similarly, the formal and informal transfer of farming knowledge in high-income countries has favored men. While young boys were socialized on the farm by their farmer fathers and taught agricultural science in public schools, young girls were directed to home economics education to prepare them to take roles as wives and mothers. Lastly, access to capital has eluded many women as financial institutions and government programs fail to recognize women as “real farmers” and systemically discriminate in favor of men.

A number of rural sociological studies undertaken since the 1980s have shown that women make a sizable economic contribution to the farm household and rural economy in high-income countries (Sachs 1983; Alston 1995). Like their non-farm peers, they also carry a disproportionate share of the household and child care burden, and often provide invaluable off-farm income that is responsible for subsidizing the farm operation. In the past three decades, the changing structure of rural economies forced many women into the paid labor force for the first time. Economic decline, coupled with agricultural specialization and technological advancement, often furthered women’s marginalization from farming. As a result of the structural transformations, many women turned to off-farm work, which provided access to new streams of income and other resources. As such, some scholars concluded that women’s off-farm work is empowering and facilitates women’s decision-making on farm matters. Other scholars have challenged this notion, contending that the jobs available to farm women are limited in rural economies, forcing women into unfulfilling and poorly paid employment. Moreover, time spent off the farm diminishes the importance of the type of farm work they are able to accomplish within time constraints and further reduces women authority in a family farm setting. Shortall (2002, 171) argues that it is “women’s off farm work that keeps farming male.” Similar to non-farm women who experience the so-called second shift of household and child care in addition to their formal employment, farm women experience the so-called third shift, in which they maintain off-farm employment, household and childcare, and on-farm tasks.

Regardless of these challenges, women in high-income countries are increasingly establishing themselves as farmers either independently of males or as equal partners. As of 2012, women made up 30 percent of the farm population in the United States, 28 percent in Australia, and over 25 percent in France. This trend is part of a growing feminization of agriculture that typifies many high-income countries as new opportunities emerge for female farmers. Women farmers differ from men in a number of ways. Women farmers are more likely to have attained a higher level of education than male farmers. They are also likely to be older than male farmers. The average age of US women farmers is 59 years versus 57 years for men. This is, in part, explained by the fact that, farming is a second career that many women turn to later in life.

Women in high-income countries often organize their farming activities differently from men. Women are more likely to engage in production practices that are smaller in scale, more labor intensive, and generate smaller agricultural sales. Women are more likely to embrace a wider variety of value orientations in their work beyond the pursuit of economic growth. They tend to be more reliant on local or regional markets than national or global markets, some research suggests that they tend to be oriented to more sustainable production practices, and they frequently espouse the integration of values such as education, conservation, and aesthetics in their operation. These differences are believed to be due, in part, to the legal and socio-technical barriers women have faced in accessing technology, knowledge, markets, land, labor, and capital. It is also due to inroads from the feminist movement that opened new doors to women that were closed only two or three decades ago. In part, because of the obstacles women have faced, they are now emerging as agricultural leaders in advancing new production models that are intended to further sustainable agrifood production. Women are increasingly seen as the mobilizing force helping to shape a new type of farming system that prioritizes community and economic embeddedness, environmental integrity, and spirituality.

A unifying issue across high- and low-income countries is the role that women play in the social reproduction of the household, which includes feeding their families. This means women across the globe continue to be disproportionately responsible for food production for home consumption in low-income countries, food shopping in high-income countries, and food

preparation in the home. Because of this gendered division of labor, women often shape the diet and nutrition of a family. For these reasons, female farming systems, especially in low-income countries, have gained renewed attention from governments and development agencies, who understand that empowering women in production contributes to improved household food access and well-being, especially for children. Despite significant strides made, it is clear that both laws and other social institutions will need to change to secure women's rights to land and other valuable resources needed for creating sustainable farming systems. In addition, there is still an overwhelming bias toward assuming women are not farmers, despite abundant evidence that women are engaged in a wide range of agricultural activities. This bias has ripple effects for female farming systems in terms of women's ability to access resources to improve production techniques, such as extension services and farmer-to-farmer training, as well as in terms of women's representation in the leadership structure of agricultural organizations (see Meinzen-Dick et al. 2011). While these concerns disproportionately impact women in low-income countries, often with more dire consequences, such biases also continue to constrain women engaged in farming systems in high-income countries.

SEE ALSO: Division of labor, gender; Feminization of labor; Gender and development

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