



# **Women in African Agriculture:** farmers, mothers, innovators and educators

**A Montpellier Panel Briefing Paper**  
**By Lindiwe Majele Sibanda**

# The Montpellier Panel

*All Panel members serve in a personal capacity*

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## Introduction

We, the members of the Montpellier Panel, call for an urgent and transformative focus on the needs and perspectives of women in smallholder agricultural policy in sub-Saharan Africa.

Women play crucial roles as farmers and businesswomen - in smallholder agricultural production, as mothers managing household nutrition, and as innovators and educators. Indeed these roles span across the entire value chain.

This briefing highlights the findings of a programme 'Women Accessing Re-aligned Markets', led by the Food Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network from 2009-2012, and other practical approaches to inclusive agricultural development.

Because of women's dominant presence in all aspects of smallholder production, ensuring policy priorities take into account their needs and socio-economic conditions is imperative. Yet including women in agricultural policy processes in sub-Saharan Africa will require a significant change in approach to overcome such challenges as low literacy rates and the logistical and cultural barriers to participation of rural women in public decision-making fora.

## Summary of Recommendations

We recommend that future support by European governments and other donors be channelled to the following priority areas:

- Identifying partners that can link women farmers to markets and help women's groups participate fully in agricultural value chains;
- Improving the availability of gender disaggregated data for policymakers and citizens;
- Assessing and designing agricultural development programming to ensure programmes are gender aware and gender transformative;
- Training and empowering a critical mass of women to participate in and lead agricultural research and policy development;
- Fostering more experimentation and systematic evaluation of mechanisms to improve women's access to agricultural markets, credits and inputs.

## The Challenge

In its 2012 report, the Montpellier Panel argued that a large number of the poorest and most disadvantaged and marginalised people in sub-Saharan Africa are women and some of the poorest households are headed by women. National agricultural policies, however, often assume farmers are mostly men. According to the FAO, women in some African countries spend up to 60 percent of their time on agricultural activities. Women farmers contribute up to 50 percent of labour on farms in sub-Saharan Africa. More than 60 percent of employed women in sub-Saharan Africa work in agriculture.



Developing policies that focus on the needs of women is not just a political priority it is an economic imperative. As the FAO states, there is a significant global gender gap in agriculture, which translates into a costly lost opportunity to improve the quality and quantity of the world's food supply. If women had the same access to, and control over productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30 percent. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4 percent, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12 to 17 percent (100-150 million).

In practice, women farmers tend to rely on rain-fed agriculture, and have poor access to inputs (fertilisers, seeds and water), to extension (most extension agents are men), to credit, and to markets for their products. They either own small pieces of land or have no land at all. In Africa, women receive 7 percent of extension services, 1 percent of all agricultural credit and own only 1 percent of the land. Women also bear the brunt of the burden of providing social protection services both to vulnerable people within the immediate family and those in their community. This limits their potential as agricultural producers. At the same time, by force of circumstance or by culture, women are often highly resilient, able to turn their hands to many different tasks and to find ways of overcoming obstacles.

Drawing on a very large body of research, the FAO

confirms that putting more income in the hands of women yields beneficial results for child nutrition, health and education. The World Bank also reported that in Rwanda and Malawi, children from women-headed households were healthier than children from male-headed households—even when the male-headed households had higher incomes. Better nutrition enhances the cognitive and mental development of children, contributes to more years of schooling and ultimately enhances their productivity when they attain adulthood.

Fundamentally, we believe women play a key role in linking agriculture and nutrition outcomes, as mothers through pregnancy and breastfeeding, and as household decision-makers taking forward supplementary feeding, and the preparation of other family meals.

In summary, women have crucial roles as farmers, mothers, innovators and educators.

## WARM

The personal experience of Ninita Armando Machava, a WARM policy advocate from Mozambique, is testimony of what can be accomplished by programmes focusing on empowering women with information, skills, and platforms for policy advocacy:

*‘The WARM programme has enriched my life. The policy advocacy training has helped me to understand the need to strategise and build alliances for better results when we want changes in agricultural policies’.*

The programme ‘Women Accessing Re-aligned Markets (WARM)’, financed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and pilot tested by the Food Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), with local partners in Malawi and Mozambique, focused on the challenge of including women in agricultural policy-making processes in sub-Saharan Africa. Over the last three years the programme demonstrated how a combination of logistical, cultural, and economic factors, coupled with a lack of gender statistics in the agricultural sector, has resulted in the design of programmes that fail to fully appreciate women's specific needs. In 2010 the two pilot countries' adult female literacy was at 42 and 68.4 percent, whereas adult male literacy was at 70.8 and 81.1 percent, respectively. Traditionally, engagement in policy processes has been the preserve of government and the literate.

WARM was created to address agricultural market barriers that are common to women farmers in Africa, such as poor representation in policy processes, marginalisation in business relations, and minimal control over access to factors of production like land and inputs.

*“The WARM programme has enriched my life. The policy advocacy training has helped me to understand the need to strategise and build alliances for better results when we want changes in agricultural policies”*



The WARM programme used FANRPAN's experience as a regional multi-stakeholder policy research network to bridge the divide between female farmers, researchers and agricultural policy processes. It used Theatre for Policy Advocacy (TPA) to engage stakeholders, encourage community participation, research the needs of female farmers and package messages for policy makers and managers of development programmes. The programme showed how theatre could be used to explain agricultural policy to people in rural areas and to carry voices from the countryside back to government. The TPA empowered women farmers to speak out about their challenges, by opening up a community dialogue at the end of each play, often touching on subjects that would be considered risky or taboo in any other setting.



Some of the local recommendations for action that came out of these community dialogues included: the promotion of farming as a business in rural communities; the need to support the empowerment of women (specifically addressing gender-based violence); the creation of effective local markets with regulated prices that better serve farmers; improving access to rural finance; equipping women with knowledge and new farming technologies; and improving local infrastructure (Table 1).

## Practical Approaches

These broad messages can be translated into action for policy makers with practical examples of work already being done to empower women:

- **Identifying partners that can link women farmers to markets and help women's groups to start participating fully in agricultural value chains**

*Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)* - a female trade union in India that began in 1972, helps women gain full time employment and self reliance. It operates through a network of cooperatives, self-help groups,

banks and training centres aimed at providing women with work, income, food, training and social security. Its success, as proven by the increase in membership from 320 in 1972 to almost 1.3 million in 2009, has meant it is now being expanded into other Asian countries: Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. 54% of its members are small, marginal farmers in rural areas.

- **Improving the availability and dissemination of user friendly gender disaggregated data for policymakers and citizens**

*IFPRI's Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index* - launched in February 2012, this index is a measure that directly captures women's empowerment and inclusion levels in the agricultural sector. It encapsulates five key areas: decisions over agricultural production, power over productive resources such as land and livestock, decisions over income, leadership in the community, and time use. The index, developed through a partnership between the US Government's Feed the Future initiative, of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) of Oxford University, has already been piloted in three countries, Bangladesh, Guatemala and Uganda, and will be used by the US government for impact monitoring and performance evaluation in their Feed the Future focus countries.

Providing 'information and evidence through disaggregated data and convincing evidence on specific needs of farm women', was one of the recommendations of the first Global Conference on Women in Agriculture (GCWA), convened in March 2012. GCWA is to be held every three years, with the Forum for Agriculture Research in Africa (FARA) offering to host GCWA 2 in 2015.

- **Designing and assessing agricultural development programming to ensure programmes are gender aware and gender transformative**

*The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's* approach to creating gender-responsive agricultural development programmes seeks to identify practical ways in which both women as well as men can be included in agricultural programmes and initiatives. We would like to recommend this approach to governments and others working in agricultural development in Africa: 'know her, design for her, and be accountable to her'. The approach is further elaborated in table 2.

**Table 1: Messages from WARM TPA post-performance dialogues in Mozambique and Malawi**

Region	Challenge	Detail	Community Solution
Boane, Mozambique	Access to credit facilities	Weak capacity of women farmers to articulate strategy for accessing credit “Fundo de Investimento de Iniciativa Local (FIL)”	Mechanisms of accessing credit must be simplified for the farmers
Boane, Mozambique	Produce Spoilage	Produce spoilage due to distant markets, lack of dedicated markets, transport challenges	Creation of the local markets that serve farmers better; investment in value addition industries; and development of roads linking farmers to markets
Boane, Mozambique	Low producer prices	Weak farmer organisation, price negotiation and advocacy skills	Capacity development initiatives
Marracuene, Mozambique	Lack of Appropriate Seed	Lack of appropriate seed and inadequate knowledge of use of improved seed and fertiliser	Private sector support to invest in input distribution; increased extension support
Lilongwe, Malawi	Gender violence	Culturally-induced gender based violence weakens women’s control over resources	Victim support units and centres
Lilongwe, Malawi	Mismanagement of input vouchers	Malpractices affecting access by women to inputs at Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC) markets and access to vouchers/coupons	Government has to introduce mitigation measures at ADMARC depots
Lilongwe, Malawi	Women access to land	Very few women farmers own land in their communities	Introduction of appropriate empowering policies and byelaws
Malawi Women Advocates	HIV/AIDS	Impact of HIV/AIDS	New ways of farming that are less labour intensive

**Table 2: How to design a gender-responsive programme.**

*(This is not an exhaustive list; rather, these are examples to help you apply the gender requirements to your specific opportunity.)*

	KNOW HER	DESIGN FOR HER	BE ACCOUNTABLE TO HER
Gender Aware	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do a gender analysis of your sector and region;</li> <li>Understand the differing roles and responsibilities of women and men;</li> <li>Recognise the context and circumstances of women on the farm, in the market, and in their community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create targets for women in participation and leadership activities;</li> <li>Hire and train women when relevant to reach women farmers;</li> <li>Anticipate changes to women’s time and labour as a result of your programme;</li> <li>Design for women’s productive and reproductive workloads, and account for multiple responsibilities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct a review of how your project is meeting women’s aspirations and how women and men are benefitting;</li> <li>Monitor women’s involvement and their influence on project goals;</li> <li>Revise and iterate the project strategy to deepen women’s participation in the project;</li> <li>Collect sex-disaggregated data.</li> </ul>
Gender Transformative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand the structures and systems that determine women’s position in society;</li> <li>Study social dynamics and determine how the project can affect women’s power and influence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Include a programme objective dedicated to achieving more equitable and efficient outcomes for women;</li> <li>Partner with women’s rights organisations to shift and challenge inefficient social norms or perceptions;</li> <li>Engage men to change perceptions and behaviours about gender roles and efficient allocation of resources between women and men.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Measure the project’s impact on men and the entire community as well as on women;</li> <li>Account for goals that are bigger than a single intervention, but that achieve a change in the status and position of women at large.</li> </ul>

The 2011 report 'Girls Grow: A Vital Force in Rural Economies' from the *Chicago Council on Global Affairs* recognises the need for a special focus on rural adolescent girls as potential agents of change in agricultural economies. The report recommends increased investment in the education, health of, and data on, girls in rural areas to enable them to release their full social and economic potential in their communities.

In March 2012, nine international development agencies (*ActionAid, Care, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, Find Your Feet, Oxfam, Practical Action, Save the Children, and Self Help Africa*) produced a briefing 'What Works for Women: Proven approaches for empowering women smallholders and achieving food security'. This work shared the lessons learned based on the agencies' experience of promoting gender equality and working with women smallholders and rural women over many decades. The paper concludes with a number of recommendations for policy makers on measures to help close the gender gap in agriculture.

- **Training and empowering women to participate in and lead agricultural research**

*AWARD* - a two year career development programme for women that fosters research and leadership skills, *AWARD* has been running since 2008. Launched as a five year project of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and USAID, its success has recently ensured that it will continue for at least another 5 years, benefiting another 260 women. So far 250 women from 11 African countries are enrolled on the programme and *AWARD* is partnered with over 100 national agricultural research institutes.

- **Fostering more experimentation and systematic evaluation of mechanisms to improve women's access to agricultural markets**

*CARE's* Pathways to Empowerment Programme - launched in 2012, the programme, funded through a \$15 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, will implement and scale their successful model of increasing women's access to quality agricultural resources like land, water, markets, agricultural training and services through collective actions, Village Savings and Loans groups and other empowerment programmes. It will reach 150,000 women smallholder farmers over five years in Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Malawi, Mali and Tanzania.

## Conclusion

These examples show that the perspectives and needs of women, while often the missing piece in agricultural policy-making, can be successfully integrated into projects and programmes. We therefore recommend a renewed emphasis on ensuring that women form an integral part of planning for and delivering agricultural development in sub-Saharan Africa.

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