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# Women involvement in Agriculture

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**ABSTRACT**

*Agriculture underpins food security, export earnings and rural development in most developing countries. FAO statistics s production suggest that farming remains the only source of income for an estimated 70 percent of the world's rural poor, many of whom are smallholders. Millions of people around the world depend on agriculture, directly or indirectly, to ensure their livelihoods.These pronounced differences in how women and men participate in the cultivation of food crops as opposed to the commercial activity of raising cash and export crops mean that asymmetric support in developed countries, as well as adjustments in agricultural sectors to trade liberalization and the integration of markets, may threaten women's and men's livelihoods and food security in very many ways. In this paper discusses women's contribution to agriculture,Important commodities in developing countries agricultural trade, New economic opportunities for women in agriculture.*

**KEYWORDS :**

**Introduction:**

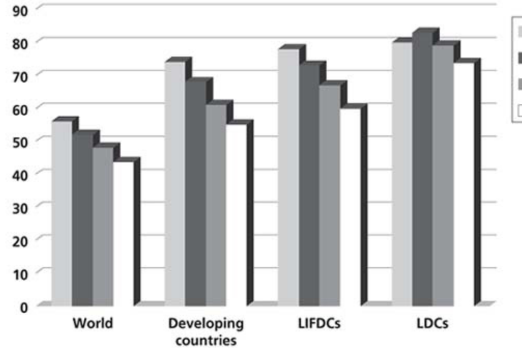
Agriculture is an important component of the economy of many developing countries as it significantly contributes to domestic production and employment. It is also of key relevance because of its contribution to ensuring food security, which remains a major concern in many developing countries and especially least developed countries (LDCs). Women and men are not evenly represented among the various agricultural sectors such as livestock farming or export crops. These sectors are differently affected by trade liberalization, and therefore the consequences for women and men are not the same. Existing gender gaps may increase or shrink. Additionally, since women and men often have different education, income and skills, their capacity to respond to changes in policy also varies. Because women and men in developing countries have different roles in agriculture, and have historically been placed differently in relation to access and use of productive resources, the effects of trade liberalization will necessarily have diverse impacts and effects on both.

The challenges discussed above are often exacerbated by agricultural systems in which the gender division of labour tends to be inflexible and were traditional approaches are increasingly undermined by the process of globalization. Generally, food crops produced for household consumption or for the domestic market are cultivated and marketed by women; this is the case, for example, in sub-Saharan Africa for most vegetables and tubers. More commercial or industrialized crops such as cotton or sugar, cultivated on a much larger scale for direct export or further processing, are more frequently within men's economic domain (Koehler). FAO estimates that, in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, women produce as much as 80 percent of basic foods, while in South and Southeast Asia, 60 percent of cultivation work and other food production is done by women.

**Women's contribution to agriculture:**

Agriculture continues to play an important role in most non-industrial economies, as a major contributor to the country's export earnings and as a source of employment and livelihood. Official statistics often underestimate the value of women's work and their overall contribution to national wealth. Women continue to provide a large proportion of the labour that goes into agriculture. FAO's estimates show that women represent a substantial share of the total agricultural labour force, as individual food producers or as agricultural workers, and that around two-thirds of the female labour force in developing economies is engaged in agricultural work.FAO has noted that while the overall proportion of the economically active population (EAP) working in agriculture declined during the 1990s, the percentage of economically active women working in agriculture at the global level remained nearly 50 percent through 2000, with an even higher percentage in developing countries (61 percent) and in LDCs (79 percent). Furthermore, although FAO projections to 2010 indicate a continued reduction in the overall female participation in agriculture globally, the percentage of economically active women working in agriculture in LDCs is projected to remain above 70 percent. The chart below compares FAO estimates of the proportions of the female economically active population working in agriculture, first at the global level, and then for developing countries, low-income food deficit countries (LIFDCs) and the Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

**Percentage of economically active women working in agriculture, 1980-2010 (projected)**




Part of the overall decline in the percentage of economically active women in agriculture globally is attributable to the greater involvement of rural populations in off-farm employment, in addition to the ongoing increase in migration to urban areas. Yet what is generally clear from the FAO data is that, as an aggregate, the low-income countries of the world - where agricultural production is still labour-intensive - also tend to have the highest percentages of economically active women working in agriculture, particularly in the LDCs. These percentages are also linked to an increase in male migration to off-farm activities, with women either assuming more responsibility for the family farm or for increased production of cash crops and food processing activities in order to increase family incomes.

The female contribution to the overall economy is high throughout Asia and the Pacific region, particularly in terms of labor input into agriculture. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Vietnam have particularly high percentages of women employed in the agricultural sector, with estimates ranging between 60 and 98 percent. Indeed, in most Asian countries the number of women employed in agriculture as a percentage of the EAP is higher than that of men. As FAO reports, "this finding is even more significant given that data for the economically active population in agriculture tends to exclude the unpaid work by rural women in farm and family economies. If unpaid work were included, the figures for female employment in agriculture would be even higher."

Women's increased responsibilities in recent decades for reproducing and maintaining the family, in most lower-income countries, have resulted in rather complex and demanding livelihood strategies. These diversified livelihood strategies have to respond to the internal and external dynamics that typically influence rural families, such as:

- Increased out-migration by men, leaving women with sole responsibility for their families.
- Increased economic vulnerability to global market forces as traditional foods become less economical to produce, rural incomes decline, commercial agriculture becomes more input-intensive, and productive resources are dominated by agribusiness.
- Local and regional crises, such as civil conflict and HIV/AIDS, leaving women to care for orphaned dependants.

**Important commodities in developing countries agricultural trade:**

**Sugar**

Sugar production and exports are crucial for many developing countries but trade and prices have been falling. Domestic supports and tariff levels are high in developed countries, creating huge trade distortions which the Uruguay Round has done little to reduce. Significant progress in the Doha Round is important for many countries, particularly as market growth is occurring primarily in developing countries.

Sugar cane or beet is produced in over 130 countries, with sugar cane accounting for 65-70 percent of global production. Developing countries will account for nearly all future production growth to the end of 2010, raising their share from 67 percent in the period 1998-2000 to 72 percent by 2010. There has been considerable consolidation in the industry, with the top ten producers accounting for 70 percent of world output in 2001, up from 56 percent in 1980.

World sugar consumption is expanding, reflecting rising incomes and shifts in food consumption patterns. Developing countries account for more than 60 percent of current global sugar consumption and are expected to be the primary source of future demand growth, particularly those in Asia.

International trade in sugar and sugar products has contracted because of increased sugar production by countries that heavily subsidize their domestic sector. This has been narrowing markets for traditional exporters, including those under preferential trade agreements.

Sugar program supports in the United States depend on a tariff rate quota (TRQ) based on domestic output. Production increases have reduced import quota volumes to the WTO-mandated minimum. This decline and price erosion has redirected production from developing countries onto the world market. Low output capacity and high production costs have forced many Caribbean sugar-producing nations into crisis: Cuba, Jamaica and St. Kitts-Nevis have either closed their industries, diversified former sugar cane areas or are searching for ways to improve the efficiency of their sugar industries.

**Cotton**

Many developing countries are increasing their production of and trade in cotton, with the help of new technologies, and the industry is an important rural employer. Major exporters such as the United States and European Union support cotton production and exports, driving down international prices and thereby limiting production growth in developing countries. Import tariff reductions, and import quota removal will bring major changes to the cotton and textile/apparel markets, intensifying competition among suppliers.

Cotton is an internationally traded commodity as well as a major employment generator. The International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC) estimates than more than 100 million farming units worldwide are directly engaged in cotton production, with many more in ancillary activities. Major players in cotton production and trade include China, India, the United States, the European Union and central Asian and African states. China's cotton output has fluctuated considerably, but it is the world's largest exporter of apparel and remains a potential market for raw cotton exporters. With biotech cotton and new, lowcost producers, and with the implementation of the Agreement of Textiles and Clothing (ATC), world cotton production is expected to grow by 1.5 percent annually. This will increase trade in cotton to 6.5 million tons by 2010, about nine percent higher than the current level.

Most of the growth in end-use cotton has been in developed countries, which increasingly import clothing and textiles from developing countries. Mill consumption and imports of raw cotton are increasing in developing countries, particularly in industrializing Asian countries. While the trade in raw cotton is predominantly from developed countries to developing countries, trade among developing countries is growing. Burkina Faso, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali in West Africa, along with Egypt, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Tanzania, are increasing their cotton exports. More than 20 percent of Africa's raw cotton is now exported internationally. Developing countries in Asia absorb 55 percent of global imports, with Europe accounting for much of the remainder and Mexico also a significant importer.

Several major textile-exporting countries such as China, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan may become major importers of raw cotton.

**Banana, and other fruit and vegetables**

Exports of banana and other fruit and vegetables are increasingly important for many developing economies. There are few subsidies for producers in developed countries and tariffs are low. However, tariff escalation does take place with processed produce such as fruit juice, and there are extra phytosanitary controls in many countries that affect imports of fruit and vegetables. There is a demand for harmonization of technical standards and treatments of exports, which have an impact on production processes and agrochemical practices.

Fruit and vegetables are important commodities for developing countries seeking to diversify exports. World trade in all categories has significantly increased, while the value of exports from developing countries increased by US$ 4.5 billion from 1992 to 2001, up 55 percent, from 31 to 37 percent of total world exports. The value of world fruit and vegetable exports was US$ 34.6 billion in 2001. Fruit accounted for almost 60 percent of this and vegetables for a little over 40 percent. The main fruits were citrus (21 percent), bananas (19 percent), grapes and apples. The value of trade in tropical fruits (mango, papaya, pineapple and others) is slightly under US$ 1 billion (5 percent). The most traded items are tomatoes and onions.

Developing countries account for virtually all exports of banana and tropical fruit, and about half the trade in citrus. The value of exports such as avocados, melons, pears, green beans, tomatoes, asparagus, aubergines and onions is higher in developing than in developed countries, with a concentration of exports from a few countries. However, the participation of LDCs in trade is very low: between 1997 and 2001 their share in fruit export was 0.5 percent, and in vegetable export, 0.8 percent. Developing countries are less successful at adding value to their fruit and vegetables, and have a lower share in the exports of processed products - 36 percent in 2001.

**Coffee**

In terms of value, coffee is one of the most important globally traded commodities and is critically important to millions of rural households throughout the world. It is the primary source of income for an estimated 25 million small coffee farmers in more than 50 countries. Coffee is emblematic of the problems faced by commodity exports from developing countries. Price falls for coffee have been particularly dramatic: after a brief recovery in the mid-1990s when buffer stocks were cleared, by 2001 real coffee prices had fallen to levels lower than ever recorded. In real terms, coffee prices today are less than one-third of their 1960 levels and, for many producers, less than the cost of production. Some have attributed this phenomenon to the market fundamentals of supply and demand, although there seem to be many differing conclusions as to the causes of the current coffee crisis.

Governments ensured stable market outlets and price discovery for commodities, in this way providing a safety net. Increased privatization and liberalization of agriculture, not only in coffee supply chains, has eliminated state intervention that could have more readily signaled impending crises among small farmers who cultivate cash crops for export. Moreover, this privatization has resulted in further exclusion from international markets, forced rationalization and worsening household food security for many of the world's most vulnerable farming households.

**New economic opportunities for women in agriculture:**

The increased input of female labor into agro processing and manufacturing export activities tends to be associated with the ongoing process of liberalization in trade and investment, and with the expansion of TNC operations in developing economies. These new job opportunities do not always result in improved living conditions for women and their families. Heightened demand for female labour is not usually associated with higher wages but is widely observed to be associated with an increase in flexibility of the labour market. This generally goes hand in hand with low wages, lack of social protection, and poor contractual conditions such as very short-term contracts with reduced benefits, long working hours, and no rights of association, all of which exacerbate the exploitation of women and child labour.

Non-traditional agricultural exports of horticultural or high-value products increasingly involve women's labour. In the cut-flower sectors of Colombia, Ecuador or East Africa, for instance, women may have experienced higher levels of employment and direct income in the short term, although these benefits are somewhat mitigated by health and environmental hazards and unsustainable agricultural production methods. In other areas, such as in the production of coffee or cocoa in African countries, the increased commercialization of export crops has shifted the distribution of income away from women, by reducing food crop production on family farms, and is not necessarily associated with higher income.

While women in rural areas may benefit from increased employment in the agro-export sector, they also tend to bear a disproportionate share of the costs associated with the conflicts and crises of the trade liberalization era. Following the East Asian crisis of 1997-98, for instance, around 25 percent of those who dropped out of the labour force were women, compared to 7.4 percent of men. Additionally the number of women with more flexible and short-term contracts in agricultural related activities rose.

**Conclusion:**

Women's participation in decision-making in the agricultural sector is low, and agricultural policy tends to neglect women's concerns and the women-specific factors of rural development. Traditional social safety nets in rural areas of developing countries tend to wither away during the process of integrating into the global economy. The vulnerability of rural families, and of women in particular given the additional burden they face, increases with the migration of their relatives that results from the decline of the family farm and the move into export-oriented activities.An increasing body of literature on gender-related aspects of trade has been emerging over the last decade. However, there is little empirical information available about women's involvement in trade expansion, and the impact of agricultural trade liberalization on women's rights and roles in agriculture and the rural economy, nor on gender equality more broadly speaking.

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