

Women and the agri-food system

According to a recent study published by the FAO, “*Estimating global and country-level employment in agrifood systems*”, around 1.23 billion people are employed in the world’s agrifood systems, and more than three times that figure, or almost half the world’s population, live in households linked to agrifood systems. Of these 1.23 billion people, 857 million worked in primary agricultural production and 375 million in the off-farm segments of agrifood systems. The research focused on entire agrifood systems rather than only on direct agricultural sectors, reflecting the increasing importance of off-farm activities in feeding the world’s population, currently 8 billion and growing, and the evolution of rural and food system transformation. In relation to this study, and another one launched more recently, also by the FAO, “*The status of women in agrifood systems*”, where three important issues are discussed: women, first of all, but also youth and poverty; issues that have been gaining importance in discussions on public policies, mainly those related to empowerment and equality, education, competences for employment, training and the labour market, topics in which it finds ourselves immersed on the occasion of the structural reforms currently underway in the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. More than an analytical exercise on these topics, what is sought here is to enrich the discussion based on what has been found in these studies.

Agrifood system - AFS is a major employer of women globally and constitute a more important source of livelihood for women than for men in many countries. The data obtained indicate that women represent around half of the workforce making up the majority in the food processing and services sector. Globally, 36 percent of working women and 38 percent of working men work in AFS. For both women and men, this represents a decline of about 10 percentage points since 2005, driven almost exclusively by a reduction in employment in primary agricultural production. Some additional numerical highlights tell us that, globally, women engaged in wage employment in agriculture earn 82 cents for every dollar that men earn, however, female workers are significantly more likely than male workers to work part-time or in other vulnerable positions. While 75 percent of policy documents relating to agriculture and rural development from 68 countries recognize women’s roles and/or women’s challenges in agriculture and rural development, only 19 percent included policy goals related to gender.

Women and youth were heavily impacted by the pandemic because they represent a large share of low-skilled and poorly-educated workers and, as such, are more likely to be self-employed or casual workers and thus more likely to lose their jobs and to experience income disruptions. 22 percent of women lost their jobs in the off-farm segment of AFS in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared with only 2 percent of men. Women in a situation of poverty and with the presence of children in the home were the most affected. The COVID-19 crisis deepened the structural knots of gender inequality in the different regions of the world and threatened the autonomy of women. What is concluded from these studies is that, in general, women account for a greater share of agricultural employment at lower levels of economic development, as inadequate education, limited access to basic infrastructure and markets, high unpaid work burden and poor rural employment opportunities outside agriculture severely limit women’s opportunities for off-farm work; but also that increasing women’s empowerment is essential for women’s wellbeing and has a positive impact on agricultural production, food security, diets and child nutrition.

On the other hand, youth (defined as people aged 15–35), in most of the countries, represent half of the workers engaged specifically in agriculture and more than half of the people engaged in food processing and services. In terms of poverty, consistent with the process of structural transformation, as GDP increases, the share of poor individuals engaged in AFS declines, meaning that the largest proportion of youth participating in AFS is particularly from poor countries. In almost all countries, the share of individuals in poverty in AFS outside of agriculture is almost uniformly

lower than the share of individuals in poverty engaged in agriculture. This is evident at both high and low levels of per capita GDP. Regarding the socioeconomic and demographic patterns of engagement in AFS, it was found that as countries develop, the relative proportion of people engaged in the non-agriculture segments of AFS – which are more likely to be located in peri-urban or urban areas, increases. This is consistent with structural transformation processes whereby urban and rural areas become increasingly connected through more complex value chains. This pattern is related to the youth bulge in these countries, with a large youth population located in rural and peri-urban areas who have few other options than to rely on AFS for their livelihoods.

It is clear then that as in other areas of the world of work, inequality is also endemic in the AFS and that something urgent needs to be done to accelerate change and that something involves empowerment. Reducing gender inequalities in livelihoods, access to resources and resilience in AFS is a critical pathway towards gender equality and women's empowerment and towards more just and sustainable AFS. But and why is this important? It is important because women's empowerment can be transformative. Closing the gender gap in farm productivity and the wage gap in AFS employment would increase global gross domestic product by 1 percent (or nearly USD 1 trillion). This would reduce global food insecurity by about 2 percentage points, reducing the number of food-insecure people by 45 million, and finally, if half of small-scale producers benefited from development interventions which focused on empowering women, it would significantly raise the incomes of an additional 58 million people and increase the resilience of an additional 235 million people.

Women's empowerment and gender equality are not only a key part of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 but are also intrinsically important for women's and men's well-being and should represent a greater commitment to AFS since it is a more important source of livelihood for women than for men in many countries. An efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable AFS depend on the empowerment of all women and gender equality. In short, an effective women empowerment, including better access to resources and assets and enhancing their decision-making power, will help increase incomes and resilience for them, their households, and communities – particularly in rural areas. SDG 5 calls on us to achieve gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls by 2030 – a deadline that is fast approaching. Let's to work for it.

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