



**Session 1.1. Assessing Women's Empowerment in Agriculture
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The Need for Women Farmers to be More Empowered

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Good morning to everyone. I am honored to be a panelist in this session. And I would like to thank you for choosing to attend this parallel session.

I work as secretary general of the Asian Farmers' Association or AFA. We currently have 12 national farmers' organizations as members, located in 10 Asian countries, representing around 11 million small scale farmers, women and men, young and old, including the landless and the indigenous peoples. Our core business is "empowering small scale women and men farmers in Asia", and that is why, this session on assessing the empowerment of women in agriculture is relevant to us.

Power has been defined as the capacity or ability to make choices as well as direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events. Empowerment is the process by which this capacity is acquired by those who have been denied it.

I would like to share some stories of how our member organizations make efforts to empower their women members. Then, I would like to share some learnings, insights, lessons learned in our work for women empowerment.

Glimpses of Women in their Journey towards empowerment

Cambodia. Our member organization in Cambodia, Farmer and Nature Net, was established in 2003 after a process of consultations among village based farmers associations supported by its NGO partner, CEDAC. It acts as an umbrella organization representing and providing technical, management and capacity building services to its more than 40,000 members. It has a women's arm, with its own structure but integrated in the FNN structure. The women's arm promotes savings groups in the villages, and cooperative selling and marketing and buying.

Nepal. In a village in the far western region in Nepal, the women farmers were organized into a vegetable production group, and the District Office through its Integrated Pest Management Program is assisting the group. They plant potatoes, cauliflower, tomatoes, onions, garlic, okra, raddish, cucumber, coriander, and other leafy vegetables, as well as rice and maize. The rice that they produce is for household consumption. They sell their maize and vegetables. "We are happy with the price, though we are just price takers", said one woman during a village consultation, "and even although the market is not yet well developed here". . Most of them buy their seeds in the market, though within the community they exchange seeds. Three years ago, the group started a community seed bank.

"At first, we do not know a lot of things, but now we learned a lot. We can meet our household expenses and educate our children through the milk and the vegetables. Yet, we still have many needs. We would like to have a milk production center. Some modern equipment because everything we do is by hands --- like shelling corn. We would like a community forest where we can get the grass and the fodder. We would like to have a say in the prices of our crops. We would like to have a better road from the village to the main road. "

Nanu manages all- women cooperative in her village. There are 600 women members mostly from Dalits and indigenous groups in this cooperative. The cooperative has about USD 32,000USD. This is big for a small village like hers. The group is mainly involved in maize seed production (local variety); it sells the maize to the district agencies and the private companies. The demand is very high. Besides maize seed production, it is involved in vegetable farming, and milk production. Currently it are working on linking with the



district dairy companies to sell their milk collectively. This means that the private company will establish a milk-chilling center so that more households can engage themselves in selling milk. The group also runs saving and credit groups. This group has the policy of including even the poorest households, where the monthly saving ranges from Nepali rupees 1 to 100.

In a Dalit village with about 100 households, located in the far western region the villagers say that they are a “privileged” Dalit because they can feel that the caste dynamics is changing, and contributed this to the political and social movements that have come in to raise the awareness of the people. They have a small piece of land, students are going to school, and the upper caste is now touching their water taps. Nevertheless, they still face exclusion. “I would like to open a tea shop but not sure if the non-Dalits will come to the shop. I had been selling milk and then someone recognized that I am a Dalit, so gradually people stopped buying from me.”

Bangladesh. Poverty and Hunger situation in the Northern Region of Bangladesh is widely known as *Monga* (semi-famine like situation). *Monga* is a seasonal food insecurity, which recurrently occurs in northwestern part of the country. The region is known for its ecological vulnerability, with the residents experiencing disasters like floods, river erosion, drought spells and cold waves almost every year. Agriculture in this region yields only one or sometimes two annual harvests, in contrast with three crops per year in more fertile and benign parts of the country. In this setting, local employment is limited from September through December –in average years. As the landless and poorest survive on agricultural wage labor, their opportunities and ensuing incomes drop in this period, and they become trapped in what is called *Monga* – a cyclical phenomenon of poverty and hunger.

Other than depending on relief or *Mohajoni* (loan sharks) loan years after years, 26 poor women organized themselves, with the facilitation of an NGO Action Aid, under its FoSHOL project.

In many meetings the members discussed about their problem, made plans on how to overcome poverty. To begin with, they customized a thrift habit, where all the members started generating 20 taka (0.25 USD) per month as group savings and opened a bank account for operating “self savings and credit activities to help out its members to uptake various income generation activities for enhancement of their livelihood security through creating opportunities for sustainable livelihood options. Within 12 months, this amount culminated into Tk. 7,500 (92 USD).

With the savings money, they first purchased 600 kg. of rice and preserved it in their organization’s house with the objective that when the prices of the rice will go higher, they will sell it and consequently increase the group fund. At the same time they also took lease of 0.04 ha of land for 10 years, where they started integrated farming (vegetable, fruits, and spices) following improved production technologies. With the support of Action Aid, they already initiated various income generating activities—joint fish culture, poultry-goat-cattle rearing, puffed rice making and also a group marketing initiative. This marketing initiative makes them confidence as they bargained with the market players and reap remarkable margin from their product.

Using their own fund they purchased a shallow machine from the sole agent of a manufacturing company in the District market. By renting out this machine, they earned 585 USD- in the last season (2 seasons in a year). Now they are hopeful that they could earn year-round by using this machine for multiple purposes (i.e., rice-husking, rice-hauler, irrigation etc.) and now they can go to government offices and big markets for any services. “KKM (the national farmer organization) has given us the way to get rid of the clutches of *mohajan* and the strength and dignity to move out of poverty. KKM is our organization and if we nurture this organization in future we don’t have to starve anymore during *monga*.”

Laos. In 2009, women farmers from Attapeu, a province south of Laos, experienced the first devastating flashfloods of their lives. AFA conducted a district consultation where we facilitated a dialogue between district officials and representatives of women farmers in the affected



villages. It was the first time that affected women farmers had a formal consultation-dialogue with local government officials about their needs to respond to the effects of a changing climate.

Indonesia. Women farmers from the poor district of East Flores manage community food and seed storage or reserves. While some of them join street protest actions to urge the government to stop food importation.

Philippines. Women farmers join their husbands and sons in a 2,700 km march to ask the Philippine president to distribute 144 hectares of ancestral agricultural lands to them under the country's agrarian reform program. Here, woman farmer leader Linda Ligmon faces media. Some other women farmers who had inspired others were : Nanay Conching a leader of her tribe fighting for their ancestral lands, and now has been appointed one of the Commissioners of the National commission on Indigenous Peoples; Cheryl, president of a functional and viable all-women provincial cooperative who was able to get the support of her husband for her endeavors; and Volet, president of a mixed farmers' provincial federation leading the group in the marketing of their province's product – Philippine lemon.

Japan. Japanese farmers prepare traditional food to be promoted to consumers, in efforts to help society eat healthier diets.

The Need for Collective Action

Farmers in developing countries, mostly working on small scale, family farms, have long suffered from government's mis- and underinvestment in smallholder agriculture. Lack of access to natural resources, inappropriate policies, thin and uncompetitive markets, weak rural infrastructure, inadequate production and financial services, and a deteriorating natural resource base have all contributed to creating an environment in which farming has frequently been risky and unprofitable for smallholders. The result is growing hunger and poverty in farming communities, especially among women and children.

Farmers all over the world have tried to address their conditions of hunger and poverty by organizing themselves into farmers', producers and various self-help groups and associations. Farmers' and rural producers' organizations (FOs) refer to independent, non-governmental, membership-based rural organizations of part or full- time self-employed smallholders and family farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fishers, landless people, women, small entrepreneurs and indigenous peoples. They range from formal groups covered by national legislation, such as cooperatives and national farmers unions, to looser self-help groupings and associations. They can be organized from local, to national, to sub regional, to regional and international levels. Many of these FOs have mixed men and women farmers as members.

From the stories of the women in different countries above, we can see that their responses to their problematic situation were similar: awareness raising about their issues, organizing themselves- either geographically or along crop lines as associations or cooperatives, claim-making with government, and doing concrete, on-ground initiatives.

The roles FOs play

Politically, FOs strengthen the political power of farmers, by increasing the likelihood that policy makers and the public hear their needs and opinions.

Economically, FOs can help farmers gain skills, access inputs, form enterprises, process and market their products more effectively to generate higher incomes. By organizing, farmers can access information needed to produce, add value, market their commodities and develop effective linkages with input agencies such as financial service providers, as well as output markets. FOs can achieve economies of scale, thereby lowering costs and facilitating the processing and marketing of agricultural commodities for individual farmers. Marketing-oriented FOs can assist their members purchase inputs, equipment, meet quality standards and manage the drying, storage, grading, cleaning, processing, packing, branding, collection and transportation of produce. In this way FOs provide a more reliable supply to buyers and



sell larger quantities at higher prices. Organized farmers have greater bargaining power than individuals and are better able to negotiate with other more powerful market players to ultimately increase the profits that accrue to farmers rather than intermediaries and buyers.

The Need: Enabling Environment

For women to be empowered, an enabling environment must be present. This includes:

- **Gender sensitization activities**
Much of the particular issues that women farmers face are due to cultural, social, and traditional norms and stereotypes. It is important for women to be able to realize these. Their realizations will give them the power and inspiration to change their situation.
- **Support of men leaders promoting women empowerment**
As FOs and other political institutions are mostly led by men, these men leaders must understand and support women empowerment. Thus, they need first to be sensitized to the gender dynamics and gender inequalities. Men who promote women's empowerment must likewise be supported.
- **Policies and programs in FOs- affirmative action, own space**
In organizations with mixed membership, affirmative actions--- such as quotas for women participation and leadership seats, or providing own spaces such as women's committees, or establishing women's programs, such as economic programs, to respond to both practical and strategic needs of women and allocating sufficient budgets for these – will provide opportunities for women to increase their self confidence, build their capacities and run their own activities.
- **Policies, programs of government for claim making**
Laws, policies and programs that will help improve the lives of women farmers and allow them to organize themselves will inspire the women for collective action.
- **Appropriate, women-friendly technologies**
Time and labor saving devices and technologies, especially those technologies that reduce drudgery in work, will help women farmers have more time for themselves, for training and education activities, and for networking with other women farmers. Day care facilities can be created to enable women to participate in training, take on greater leadership roles within their organizations, and focus more on creating profit from their work.
- **Capacity building**
Women need access to the latest technological information regarding agriculture, production and coping with climate change, as well as information technologies to access this information. They need to acquire entrepreneurial and marketing skills; confidence building; leadership skills; and the ability to negotiate and discuss with authorities.
- **Leadership training and reflections**
Current dominant leadership paradigms and styles reflect masculine cultural norms, and this need to change. Training sessions and a formation program on alternative leadership which incorporates good masculine and feminine qualities and traits can be implemented with both women and men leaders as participants. The leadership program should not be a one-shot deal, but should be a systematic re-programming of the culture and mindset of the person such that s/he grows to be more and more of a gender-sensitive /responsive leader who can transform structures and systems.
- **Learning and sharing, networking and solidarity -building**
Participatory approaches to research, extension, and community development activities as well as exchanging information, tips, and lessons learned strengthen women farmers' confidence, further build their skills and strengthen their resolve to carry on.

Requirements

How Can We Help FO perform their roles in promoting women's empowerment?



- Presence of a pool of community organizers/facilitators/animators who are expected to regularly dialogue with the women members and facilitate the organizing and capacity building processes for them.
- Presence of technical experts on various fields of social development, who will provide technical assistance to leaders and staff of FOs.
- Financial support to the programs, projects, activities that the FOs will undertake. Capacity building requires budgets.
- Governments must enact laws and policies that provide opportunities for women farmers to organize, to do self-help projects, to claim their rights under women-friendly laws.

Recommendations

- Governments and development agencies can create more appropriate and sustainable agriculture and rural development policies and programs, to identify and benefit small and poor farmers more effectively, by working with, supporting and involving FOs in the planning, design and implementation of agricultural and rural policies and programs, and by supporting them in implementing farmers' own agendas.
- Institutionalize mechanisms to effectively involve FOs in agricultural and rural policy making, implementation, and assessment as well as in agricultural research and development.
- Enact appropriate legislation and regulatory frameworks to ensure FOs enjoy the right and freedom to operate independently and manage themselves.
- Support the development and improvement of FOs through capacity-building assistance and financial services so they can undertake programs and activities that can help them promote rural women's leadership. Development agencies, governments, employers and workers, can assist FOs with capacity-building efforts to train their members and representatives in business skills, accounting and financial administration, information technology, planning and management as well as organizational leadership to represent their FOs in various policy forums. Training could tackle other areas needing improvement including transparency, democracy and accountability. Funds could be provided for this purpose, but the identification of training needs and definition of the training programs content must be done by the farmer members themselves.
- Knowledge, information and technologies can reach farmers at the grassroots level more effectively if agricultural research and extension institutions proactively involve FO, particularly women farmer leaders, as they are primary teachers at home and communities.

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