



Gender Norms and Agency in the Afghanistan Agriculture Sector



Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development



Key messages

- ▶ Women seem to play a bigger role in farming decisions than is generally assumed. For example, women make food, nutrition and budgeting choices, including how much of the wheat harvest is consumed versus sold.
- ▶ Women are not considered farmers and yet tend to livestock and crops close to the household, help with post-harvest handling and processing within the household, and perform any on-farm activities allocated by the household head.
- ▶ Women do more of the on-farm work when living in poor households. Yet, gender norms and sex segregation mean women do not have the same access to technical agriculture information.
- ▶ The adoption rates of new agricultural practices would increase if extension services could reach more women in a culturally-appropriate, heterogeneous manner. For example, some women prefer to learn as a group through consultations and workshops.
- ▶ More research on gender inequality in agriculture could help identify opportunities to expand the benefits of wheat-related innovations such as new methods of planting and growing crops, for more women and poor households.

Methodology

In Afghanistan, 260 respondents from wheat-growing households across four villages participated in the research. Participants included 132 men and 128 women from Kabul and Nangarhar provinces. Wheat farmers were asked about gender norms relating to behavior, innovation, technology and agency, or the capacity to make strategic life choices and act upon them. Researchers used seven qualitative data collection instruments, including single-sex focus group discussions, participatory instruments and semi-structured individual interviews.¹

Gender norms represent perspectives on what gender relations “should” be like and how individuals of particular genders “should” behave.²

While gender norms can be restrictive and limit social interaction, they are constantly challenged and negotiated.

Agency is the ability to make choices and act upon them.

Why is addressing gender norms in agriculture important?

Some of the strongest forces behind persistent gender gaps are harmful behavioral norms and stereotypes that limit expectations of what women can or should do. These are often based upon tradition, rather than resource efficiency. Nationally, female labor is underutilized; yet, nearly one third of workers in Afghanistan’s agricultural sector are female.³ High levels of fertility and population growth, combined with women’s low educational attainment, impede improvements in agricultural productivity and household nutrition.⁴ A better understanding of gender norms and how they impact the agricultural sector could improve livelihoods and the nation’s food security.

1. For more information, see: http://42q77i2rw7d03mfrd11pvzz.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/GENNOVATE-Methodology_Feb2013_FINAL.pdf.

2. Marcus, R. (2014). Changing Discriminatory Norms Affecting Adolescent Girls through Communications Activities: Insights for Policy and Practice from an Evidence Review. London, United Kingdom: Overseas Development Institute.

3. Central Statistics Organization (2018). Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016-17. Kabul, Afghanistan: Central Statistics Organization of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

4. Ibid.

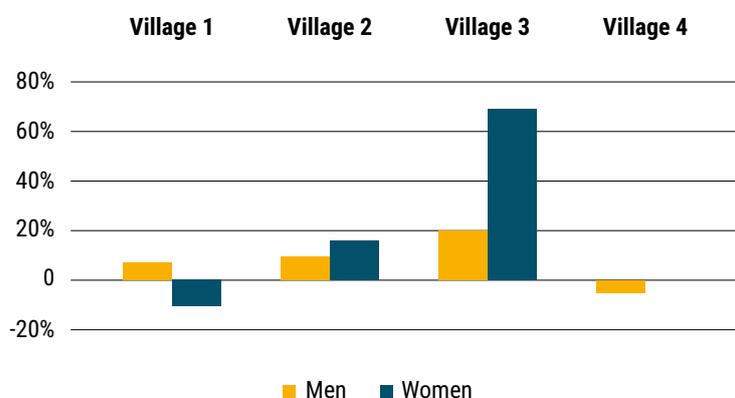
Results

1. Inequitable poverty reduction

Study participants were asked to estimate the percentage of households within their communities that have moved from below to above the poverty line established for each village within the last ten years (fig. 1). In village one, a lack of security increases poverty by preventing people from moving around freely, going to school and finding work. Men in village one reported a slight increase in the number of households in

their village that have moved out of poverty while women reported an increase in the number of households that have fallen into poverty over the last ten years. Women in village two reported a slightly higher rate of movement out of poverty compared to men. In village two, poverty reduction is influenced by a commitment to hard work, skills training and women working alongside their husbands.

Figure 1. Movement out of poverty (2004-2014)



In village three, women reported a much higher rate (65 percent), than men (20 percent) of movement out of poverty, which requires further exploration to understand. According to respondents from this village, increased farm and off-farm incomes and remittances have reduced poverty. Yet, why women scored higher in village three, compared to men and compared to other villages is unknown. Men in village four reported that 5 percent of households in their village have fallen into poverty while women reported no change in poverty rates over the last ten years.

Women and men perceive and experience poverty differently depending on where they live, their degree of agency and how intra-household relationships allocate resources. For example, women uniquely identified their lack of skills and a lack of cooperation among co-wives as placing economic tension on the household, which contributes to increased poverty. More data on intra-household dynamics and gender relations by location and how this affect agriculture productivity and innovation is required to make better sense of the data.

2. Prevailing gender norms around domestic and farming roles

Gender norms and expectations affect men and women equally but in different ways. When asked about the qualities of a “good husband,” men and women listed being hardworking, providing for his family, behaving well, avoiding conflicts, respecting his wife/wives and being a good Muslim. When asked about the qualities of a “good male farmer,” respondents explained that he should be physically strong, work hard on the farm and sell agricultural products daily. He should also be knowledgeable about his farm, cultivate on time, consult with other farmers and achieve a better outcome with fewer expenses.

When asked about the qualities of a “good wife,” men and women mainly noted a woman’s behavior toward her husband and in-laws and her broader family care roles, which include being a good Muslim and always showing respect. Across the four villages, good husbands are strongly associated with the productive sphere and earning an income to support their family while wives are associated with reproductive roles. Consequently, women are generally considered to have little knowledge about and a limited role in farming.

However, in many households, especially impoverished households, women contribute to the household economy as much as men. When asked about the qualities of a “good female farmer,” male and female respondents explained that she should know how to cultivate and should work in consultation and cooperation with her husband. Women who mostly work outside the house for pay or on their farm are usually economic migrants and female household heads. These women are less respected by the community and are considered “untamed.” Gender norms affect men and women from different socio-economic backgrounds and age groups differently, emphasizing the need for heterogeneous agriculture programs.

The gender norms around what makes a good husband and wife renders it difficult for a married woman to speak openly about economic barriers and marital problems to an enumerator who is from outside her village. Understanding appropriate research methods for gender-related research in Afghanistan’s varied terrain and agriculture sector is overdue. There is value in trying to make sense of gender relationships from a rural household’s perspective as it seems to affect norms of behavior that dictate the hours worked and tasks performed (and where).

3. Decision-making

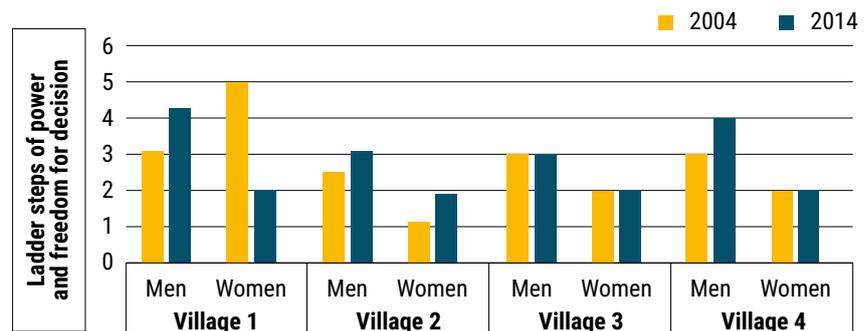
During a ranking exercise, women in all four villages ranked themselves at step two (out of five steps) in 2014 in terms of decision-making power and freedom to make important decisions (fig. 2). In village one, women reported a decrease in their power and freedom to make significant life decisions in the past ten years. In village two, women perceived an increase in their decision-making power. In villages three and four, it stayed the same. Meanwhile, men reported increases from 2004 to 2014 in their perceived power and freedom to make important life decisions, except in village three, where there was no change.

Given agency is defined as the ability to make choices and at upon them, the data shows that men have more agency than women and this has increased over the past ten years, whereas only women in village 2 experienced increased agency. Respondents consistently explained that decision-making is largely dominated by men, especially male elders, husbands, brothers or in-laws. The nature of the decision being made, along with the household composition would determine which male of what age played the greater role in the decision to be made.



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Figure 2. Decision-making power
Power and freedom to make decisions (2004-2014)



Respondents explained that women have a certain level of decision-making power around how much of the wheat harvest to allocate for household consumption versus how much to sell, as they maintain the household's food security. This has been under-reported in the existing literature, suggesting the need to more deeply probe intra-household decision-making to better understand how women make food, nutrition and budgeting choices.

4. Gendered innovation

Men's and women's ability to innovate is supported and hindered by different factors. Some factors, such as access to information and financial problems, affect both. Figure 3 shows that, for women, financial support and access to education as well as workshops and consultations (especially with elders) are the most important factors in learning about, trying and adopting agricultural innovations. For men, improvements in the economy are needed along with adequate farm land to test innovations.

Figure 4 shows financial problems and poverty as the most important factor hindering innovation for women and men. Lack of information, knowledge and education is the second most limiting factor for women, while men report a lack of courage and poor community relations, and a lack of knowledge and education. For women insecurity and distrust restrict

their mobility around the community and restrict their access to information and training. Thus gender norms and cultural practices can hinder a male

and a female farmer's ability to innovate. Those limitations affect their participation in agriculture and limit their contribution to household food security and nutrition.

Figure 3. Factors that support innovation for men and women

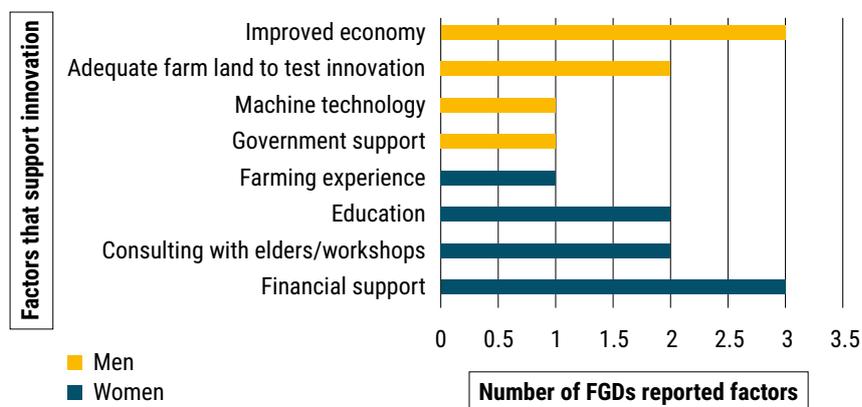
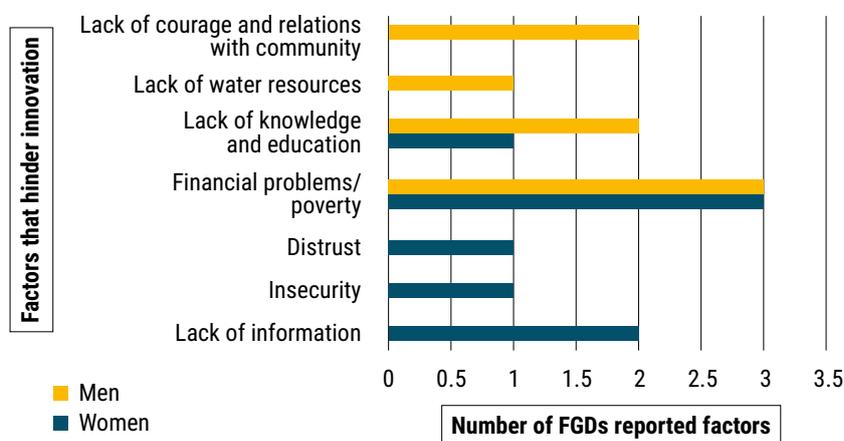


Figure 4. Factors that hinder innovation for men and women



Conclusion

This research illuminates how little is understood about how gender norms and agency work together to shape the opportunities male and female rural farmers have to benefit from agricultural innovations. Innovation in agriculture and natural resource management is vital to reducing rural poverty. Innovation processes that ignore gender relations are limited in their impact and risk worsening the poverty, workload and well-being of poor rural women and their families. Agriculture research for development professionals should consult women more often and routinely address gender inequities in a heterogeneous manner.

For more information, contact:

Kristie Druca

E-mail: k.druca@cgiar.org



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