



Gender equality, food security and the sustainable development goals

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Abstract

This paper examines the potential and limitations of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) in helping to achieve household food security. The potential lies in the attention it pays to women's access to land and natural resources, which can significantly enhance women's ability to produce and procure food. Its limitations lie in a lack of attention to the production constraints that women farmers face; its failure to recognise forests and fisheries as key sources of food; and its lack of clarity on which natural resources women need access to and why. Moreover, other goals which bear on food security as important providers of nutrition, such as SDG 15 as it relates to forests and SDG 14 as it relates to fish resources, make no mention of gender equality, nor does SDG 13 (Climate action) recognise the vulnerabilities of women farmers. A bold interpretation of SDG 5 and establishing synergies with other SDGs could provide ways forward. This includes not only SDGs which recognise the importance of gender equality, such as SDGs 1, 2, and 13 on poverty, hunger, and climate change respectively, but also SDGs 14 and 15 whose silence on gender could prove detrimental not just to attaining food security, but also to furthering their stated objectives of resource conservation.

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Introduction

Since the late 1970s, we have seen the launch of several initiatives to monitor the development performance of countries, by quantifying their progress in various dimensions of human well-being. UNDP's Human

Development Report and the World Bank's World Development Report, both produced annually, are among the best known of these initiatives. In the 2000s, however, there was a notable move beyond evaluative statistics to setting globally agreed-upon timebound goals of development. The eight Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) were a start, but the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) launched in 2016 constitute the most ambitious attempt to date. Presented as 'a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity', the SDGs combine economic, social and environmental dimensions, with a particular emphasis on social inclusion. The 17 Goals and 160 Targets are to be achieved by 2030. Identified through a long process of interaction between international organisations, governments and civil society, they reflect both the ambition of this multi-scale endeavour and the compromises that arise in building consensus among diverse actors.

This paper focuses on SDG 5—which aims at Gender Equality—to address the question: can this Goal help ensure household food security? The concept of food security is of course complex, and would encompass not only food availability in an aggregate sense but also its distribution among people, and not only caloric adequacy but also nutritional sufficiency. The diversity of food produced or procured also matters, as does the environmental sustainability of food production systems. To what extent can SDG 5 help fulfil these objectives?

I argue that SDG 5 holds substantial potential but also has serious limitations on these counts. The potential lies in its focus on two elements which have a critical bearing on household *and* national food security: women's access to land and property, and their access to natural resources. Secure land rights can enhance the productivity of women farmers whose proportions are growing with the feminisation of agriculture, and also improve intra-household nutritional allocations since owning property increases women's bargaining power within families. Access to natural resources, such as forests and fisheries, can provide important additional sources of nutritional diversity, since women are the main gatherers of food from forests and the principal producers in small-scale and inland fisheries. This potential could be extended by teaming up with Goals 1 and 2 (ending poverty and hunger respectively).

Yet there are limitations, since some key related Goals—in particular SDG 15 (Life on land) as it relates to forests,

and SDG 14 (Life below water) as it relates to marine and coastal ecosystems—make no mention of gender equality in access to these resources, nor does SDG 13 (Climate action) recognise the particular vulnerabilities of women farmers. Indeed there is little recognition in these SDGs that forests and fisheries are significant sources of food and nutritional diversity, or that women play an important role in procuring from them. Moreover, SDG 5 itself provides no clarity on which natural resources it seeks women's access to and how. Much will therefore depend on whether the gender equality goal can create synergies with other relevant SDGs, and whether these other SDGs, in turn, recognise that they need a focus on gender equality for achieving their own stated objectives. These links between SDG 5 and other SDGs which are detailed below have not been explored earlier from the perspective of food security and natural resources. But first consider what roles women play in food provisioning.

Women and food provisioning

Roles and constraints

Women play a central role in household and national food security, as food producers, household food managers, and consumers.

As producers, women constitute a substantial and growing proportion of agricultural workers, as more men than women tend to leave the agricultural sector first. In 2012, 43 per cent of all farm workers in Asia and 47 per cent in Africa were female, with percentages close to 50 or higher in Southeast and East Asia (<http://faostat.fao.org>). In some of the world's major rice producing regions, half or more of the agricultural work force is thus female. And these proportions have been growing globally, except in northern Europe, leading to a gradual feminisation of agriculture [1]. In addition women provide most of the labour time for food processing and preparation [2].

Women's ability to contribute effectively to agriculture, however, depends crucially on their access to land, which is the most important productive resource for farmers. But they are seriously disadvantaged in this respect due to male bias in inheritance laws, in social norms which restrict effective implementation of these laws, in land markets, as well as in government land distribution schemes [3,4]. Although country-level gender-disaggregated data on land ownership is limited and varies across regions, Table 1 gives some illustrative figures. We note that in Nepal women owned land in only 14 per cent of all landowning households, according to its 2001 census. For India, there are no reliable country-level data on women's land ownership, but regional surveys find low levels even in the less gender-biased southern states: for example, only 20 per cent of rural landowners in Karnataka are women. And of India's operational holdings (namely land cultivated but not necessarily owned) – only 12.8 per cent are cultivated by women, covering just 10.4 per cent of cultivated area (Agricultural Census 2010-11 [5]). In Ghana, women own land in just 10 per cent of households; in Kenya, only 5 per cent of registered landholders are female; and information collated for ten other African countries by Doss *et al.* [6] shows that, although on average 39 per cent of the sampled women own land, only 12 per cent are sole owners (the figures are 48 and 31 respectively for men). Latin America similarly shows a wide gender gap, with just 22–30 per cent of landowners being women, varying by country. Moreover, the control that women owners can exercise over land (e.g. rights to lease, mortgage, sell, or use as collateral) is more restricted than men's [3,7].

Women also have poor access to credit, irrigation, fertilizers, technology, information on new agricultural practices, and marketing infrastructure [7,11]. These disadvantages multiply if we factor in climate change, since any technical advances in, say, heat resistant or water

Table 1

Gender inequality in land access: developing countries

Region and country	Indicator	Percentage	Source
South Asia			
Nepal	Percentage landowning HHs in which women own land (2001)	14.0	Allendorf [8]
India: Karnataka state	Percentage rural landowners who are women (2010-11)	20.0	Swaminathan <i>et al.</i> [9]
Africa			
Kenya	Women as a percentage of registered landholders (c. 2002)	5.0	Deere and Doss [10]
Ghana	Percentage HHs where women own land (1991-2)	10.0	Deere and Doss [10]
Ten countries (average) ^a	Percentage of women owning land, solely or jointly	39.0	Doss <i>et al.</i> [6]
Latin America^b			
Peru	Women owning land (solely or jointly) as a percentage of all land owners (2000)	25.3	Deere and Leon [4]
Mexico	Women owning land (solely or jointly) as a percentage of all land owners (2000)	22.4	Deere and Leon [4]
Paraguay	Women owning land (solely or jointly) as a percentage of all land owners (2000)	30.2	Deere and Leon [4]

Notes: HH, households.

^a The countries are Burkina Faso, Burundi, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Malawi, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The calculations are based on the Demographic and Health surveys in these countries. For assumptions underlying the calculations, see Doss *et al.* [6].

^b For assumptions underlying the calculations, see Deere and Leon [4].

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