



Women's empowerment and gender equity in agriculture: A different perspective from Southeast Asia



Sonia Akter^{a,*}, Pieter Rutsaert^b, Joyce Luis^b, Nyo Me Htwe^c, Su Su San^c, Budi Raharjo^d, Arlyna Pustika^e

^a Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, 469C Bukit Timah Road, Singapore 259772, Singapore

^b International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), DAPO Box 7777, Metro Manila, Philippines

^c International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), Yangon, Myanmar

^d Assessment Institute for Agricultural Technology (AIAT) South Sumatra, Palembang, Indonesia

^e Assessment Institute for Agricultural Technology (AIAT) Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is considered a 'prerequisite' to achieving global food security. Gender systems, however, are diverse and complex. The nature and extent of gender inequity and the conditions necessary to empower women vary across countries, communities and regions. The study of different gender systems is thus fundamental to capture cross-cultural variations in gender specific needs and constraints to effectively address gender gaps. Although the status of women in agriculture has received extensive attention in the literature in recent decades, a research gap persists regarding the state of gender inequity in Southeast Asian agriculture. The current paper contributes to the geographical scope of the literature by presenting empirical evidence of gender inequity from four Southeast Asian countries: Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. Using the framework recommended by the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), 37 focus group discussions were conducted with 290 women farmers in the above mentioned countries. The results reveal trends that contradict the conventional narratives of gender inequity in agriculture in certain domains of empowerment. In all four countries, women appear to have equal access to productive resources such as land and inputs, and greater control over household income than men. Important intra-regional heterogeneity is observed in terms of community-level empowerment. While women play an active role in agricultural groups in Thailand and in the Philippines, this is predominantly men's territory in Indonesia and Myanmar. These findings imply that country-specific gender intervention frameworks are necessary to overcome gender gaps in agriculture.

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1. Introduction

Women produce over 50 percent of the world's food (FAO, 2011) and comprise about 43 percent of the agricultural labor force, both globally and in developing countries (Doss, 2014). Additionally, women invest as much as 10 times more of their earnings than men do in their family's well-being, in areas including child health, education and nutrition (Duflo, 2012; Maertens and Verhofstadt, 2013; Quisumbing and Maluccio, 2000). Women's empowerment thus has a direct impact on agricultural productivity and household food security (Sraboni et al., 2014; Harper et al., 2013), and as a result it remains at the core of agricultural research and outreach practices in developing countries (Gates, 2014). Donor agencies, local governments and NGOs are increasingly

targeting women as priority clients and strengthening their investments to empower women and reduce inequity between sexes (Gates, 2014; World Bank, 2012). This sentiment has been echoed through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established during the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 (United Nations, 2015): one of the 17 SDGs is "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (SDG#5) (United Nations, 2015).

Gender systems, however, are diverse and complex. They are determined by community norms and values (Mason and Smith, 2003). The nature and extent of gender inequity and the conditions necessary to empower women vary across countries, communities and regions (Jejeebhoy and Sathar, 2001; Alkire et al., 2013). For example, women in Southeast Asia are generally more empowered compared with women in other developing regions (Mason and Smith, 2003; IFAD, 2013). They have relatively higher decision making power at the household level and they are also more likely

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sonia.akter@nus.edu.sg (S. Akter).

to have control over their own earnings (IFAD, 2013; Akter et al., 2016a). Further, gender inequity is a multidimensional concept (Alkire et al., 2013). The different dimensions of inequity, such as decision making power over production and income, may vary independently across and within communities (Mason and Smith, 2003). In some communities, women may enjoy considerable decision making power over production and input while they are disempowered with respect to asset ownership, control over income, or community leadership (Alkire et al., 2013). In order to design effective gender intervention frameworks, it is important to acknowledge the context and domain specific heterogeneity in empowerment. In sum, due to the multidimensional nature of empowerment and the diversity and complexity of gender systems around the world, the study of empowerment in different context is essential to capture the cross-cultural variations in gender specific needs and constraints.

The geographical bias in gender research leads to incomplete knowledge of region-specific gender gaps in agriculture. While women's empowerment in agriculture has received extensive attention in the literature in recent decades, empirical research has focused mainly on Sub Saharan Africa and, less commonly, on South Asia. In comparison, women's empowerment in agriculture in Southeast Asia has received limited attention. In 2014, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) compiled the current state of gender research in agriculture in the book titled '*Gender in Agriculture: Closing the Knowledge Gap*' (Quisumbing et al., 2014). Table 1 provides an overview of the geographical scope of the book's chapters and the studies that are cited in those chapters. A majority of the studies were conducted in Sub Saharan Africa (59%) followed by South Asia (22%). Only 6% of the studies are from Southeast Asia.

The existing empirical studies of the 'gender in agriculture' literature consistently reveal that women lack access to and control over resources such as land and capital as well as agricultural inputs and technology such as improved crop varieties, training, information and marketing services (Fletschner and Kenney, 2014). Evidence also suggests that women have an unmanageable workload, they lack access to credit or have no decision making power over credit, and are poorly represented in agricultural and non-agricultural groups and organizations (Alkire et al., 2013; Akter et al., 2016b).

Is the story of women's disempowerment and gender inequity in Southeast Asia different than what we have learnt from the studies conducted in other regions of the world? Peterman et al.'s (2014) review of gender differences, which also acknowledges that the bulk of evidence on women's empowerment in agriculture comes from studies in Sub Saharan Africa, suggests that family farming systems in Asia might tell a different story. If region-specific information on gender gaps and gender needs and constraints remain unknown and unaccounted for, the commonly utilized gender intervention frameworks – designed based on existing knowledge and conventional narratives – will be incompatible with realities in less studied regions, and ineffective to bridge the gender divide. To ensure that development efforts are channeled in the right direction and in the right form, research focus needs to shift to regions that have been insufficiently explored in the past.

This paper aims to generate a better understanding of the global landscape of gender inequity by presenting evidence from the Southeast Asian region. We use a qualitative cross-country dataset collected from four Southeast Asian countries: Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. In addition to exploring overall regional trends, our study also examines intra-regional variation in women's empowerment in Southeast Asian agriculture.

2. Measuring women's empowerment

The definition of 'empowerment' varies across disciplinary traditions, domains and contexts. Most definitions focus on issues of gaining power and control over decisions and resources that determine one's quality of life (Narayan-Parker, 2002). Alsop et al. (2006) define empowerment as the capacity to translate choices into desired actions and outcomes given the *opportunity structure* within which one operates. Capacity is determined by *agency*, i.e. an actor or group's ability to make purposeful choices, and *opportunity structure*, refers to different aspects of the institutional context. *Agency* is analogous to asset endowment, including psychological, informational, organizational, material, social, financial, and human assets. *Opportunity structure* is measured by the rules, laws, regulatory frameworks, culture, norms and behavior of the formal and informal institutions of a society.

Empowerment in agriculture is generally defined as one's ability to make decisions on matters related to agriculture as well as one's access to the material and social resources needed to carry out those decisions (Alkire et al., 2013). The Gender and Agriculture Research Network of the Consultative Group of International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) recommends two indicators to track and evaluate empowerment (CGIAR, 2014). The first is women's control over productive resources such as land, livestock, water, forests, common property, seeds, fertilizers, machinery, financial assets, and the income from sales of crop, livestock or forest products. The second is women's decision making power over time-use and income, and their decision making power in groups and collective organizations.

The complex and multidimensional nature of empowerment makes it difficult to measure. This is especially true in the context of agriculture, where the concept of empowerment is relatively new. Researchers, practitioners and donors seeking to measure empowerment in agriculture do not yet have a widely accepted instrument at their disposal. The first comprehensive and standardized measure to directly capture women's empowerment in agriculture is the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), which was jointly developed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), IFPRI, and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) (Alkire et al., 2013). WEAI is a survey-based index reported at the country or regional level, based on individual-level data collected by interviews with men and women within the same households. WEAI evaluates five domains of empowerment: (i) production; (ii) income; (iii) resources; (iv) leadership; and (v) time. 'Production' and 'income' measure decision making power over farming, livestock, and fisheries, and control over income and expenditures. 'Resources' captures an individual's ownership, access to, and decision making power over productive resources such as land, livestock, agricultural equipment, consumer durables, and credit. 'Leadership' is measured through membership in economic or social groups and comfort in speaking in public. 'Time' assesses allocation of time among productive and domestic tasks and leisure activities. In addition to these five domains, the WEAI measures intra-household gender inequity by comparing the empowerment gap between the primary male and female in each household.

The WEAI has been applied in 13 countries of 5 regions of the world (Malapit et al., 2014). WEAI scores range from a high of 0.98 in Cambodia to a low of 0.66 in Bangladesh. Within Africa, West African countries have the lowest WEAI scores, followed by Southern Africa with higher scores, and then East Africa, with the highest scores. The index has also been used to study the relationship between women's empowerment and nutrition (Malapit and Quisumbing, 2015) as well as women's empowerment and food security (Sraboni et al., 2014).

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