

# Promising Approaches to Address the Needs of Poor Female Farmers: Resources, Constraints, and Interventions

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**Summary.** — This paper critically reviews some recent attempts to increase poor female farmers' access to, and control of, productive resources, focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. It surveys the literature from 1998 to 2008 that describes interventions and policy changes across several key agricultural resources. Compared to interventions designed to increase investment in human capital, only a minority of interventions or policy changes increasing female farmers' access to productive resources have been rigorously evaluated. Future interventions also need to pay attention to the design of alternative delivery mechanisms, tradeoffs between practical and strategic gender needs, and to culture- and context-specificity of gender roles.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A wide-ranging literature has alerted development practitioners to gender-specific constraints faced by poor female farmers (Gladwin, 2002). Many of these studies point to women's lack of access to productive resources and low levels of human capital; the cost of these gender disparities in productive resources has been well documented (World Bank, 2001). Kevane (2004), for example, pays particular attention to possible inefficiencies in intrahousehold allocation and the interaction between economic factors and gender roles as constraints to improvements in productivity and well-being in Sub-Saharan Africa. Doss (1999) also finds that African households are complex and heterogeneous, that gender roles are equally complex and embedded in agricultural and non-agricultural production systems, and that these roles and responsibilities are dynamic, responding to changing economic circumstances.

Recognizing that "gender matters," many development interventions have aimed to close the gender gap in both human and physical resources. Interventions to improve women's health, education, and nutritional status are well documented (e.g., King, Klasen, & Porter, 2007). However, the literature on innovations that addresses the productive needs of poor female farmers is relatively limited, is typically confined to one key resource (such as land), does not consider the interactions among other resources, and tends to be in the unpublished literature. This paper attempts to address this gap by reviewing recent efforts to address the needs of poor female farmers, focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa. Some South Asian innovations are also examined to ascertain the possibility of their adaptation to the Sub-Saharan African context. Because evidence documenting the greater constraints that women face in access to, and control of, productive resources is quite voluminous (see, e.g., World Bank, 2001), this paper concentrates

on the following issues: (1) What are the key strategies to address constraints to accessing productive resources? (2) What are some of the promising approaches that have been tried in the field? (3) Have these approaches been rigorously evaluated, and what are the implications for scaling up?

We conducted reviews of the published and "gray" literature from 1998 to 2008 that described interventions or policy changes in the areas of land, water, and soil fertility; new varieties and technologies; extension; human capital and technologies to enhance labor productivity; access to markets; credit and financial services; and social capital and infrastructure support services. While livestock is an important asset held by women, we do not include livestock-related interventions here; reviews of gender roles in livestock and of interventions to increase women's control of livestock can be found in Tipilda and Kristjanson (2008) and Miller (2001), respectively. We focused on those interventions that had been evaluated, noting that these comprise a minority of interventions reviewed. We then identified areas for further research and action.

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## 2. LAND, SOIL FERTILITY, AND WATER

### (a) *Land*

Women are often disadvantaged in both statutory and customary land tenure systems (Agarwal, 1994; Kevane, 2004; Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997), resulting in weak property and contractual rights to land, water, and other natural resources. Even where existing legislation protects women's property rights, lack of legal knowledge and weak implementation may limit women's ability to exercise these rights.

Many studies have documented productivity differentials between male and female farmers, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. In some cases, these productivity differentials stem from women's insecure property rights to land, which exacerbate inefficiencies created by imperfect land markets. In Ghana, Goldstein and Udry (2005) attributed the productivity differential among male and female farmers to women's higher level of tenure insecurity, which renders them less likely to leave their land fallow since they risk losing the land if they are not actively farming it. Imperfections in land rental markets create productivity differentials that are not gender neutral: not only is productivity lower on female-headed households' land, but female household heads also tend to rent out their land to tenants with much lower productivity (Holden & Bezabih, 2007). Indeed, Holden and Bezabih (2007) found significantly higher levels of inefficiency linked to contracts of female landlords with in-law tenants, owing to the difficulty of evicting one's relatives and the high transaction costs of screening and selecting better tenants. An important policy implication of their analysis is that strengthening women's land rights may improve both equity and efficiency of land use.

Following a low-cost, rapid, and transparent community land registration process in Ethiopia, female heads of households in Tigray were more likely to rent out land, because tenure security increased their confidence in doing so (Holden, Deininger, & Ghebru, 2007). The Ethiopia land certification scheme is noteworthy because land administration committees at kebele level (the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia) were required to have at least one female member and land certificates were issued after public registration for transparency (Deininger, Ali, Holden, & Zevenbergen, 2007). The land certificates included maps and, in some regions, pictures of husband and wife.<sup>1</sup> Holden *et al.* (2007) argue that land certification had a greater impact on women's participation in the land market because land certificates may be more valuable to women, whose tenure rights have been less secure than those of men.

It may even be easier for women to lease land than to purchase it because leasing does not create long-term secure property rights in the borrower/lessee. In Burkina Faso, the increased market value of land unexpectedly created avenues for women to lease land anonymously over the long term (Bruce, 2006). Male landholders who have excess land are more willing to lease to women because women cannot claim permanent rights to land. Husbands generally support this borrowing of land by their wives, and women are therefore better able to cultivate land independently, even though they do not own it (Giovarelli, 2006).

While change is needed in laws governing property rights so that women may hold individual or joint title to land, legal awareness is also important. Deininger, Ayalew Ali, and Yamano (2008) found that households' awareness of their land rights as defined by the 1998 Uganda Land Act, which strengthened tenure security and legal protection of customary owners and women, increased the propensity to undertake soil

conservation measures. An increase of a household's legal knowledge by one element would potentially increase the propensity to undertake soil conservation that is equivalent to increasing the length of possession by more than 15 years or the head's level of education by more than 7 years. Moreover, because only a minority of land users are aware of these provisions, legal literacy campaigns can have a potentially large impact on agricultural productivity.<sup>2</sup>

### (b) *Soil fertility*

While securing access to land encourages investment in sustainable land management techniques, farmers need fertilizer and improved seeds to farm their land most productively. Although female heads of households uniformly apply less fertilizer than males, when farmer characteristics are controlled for in regression analysis, the critical factors that significantly limit fertilizer application are lack of access to credit and cash (Gladwin, 1992), not the sex of the farmer.

Targeting credit to female farmers for fertilizer purchases has been recommended for more than a decade (Gladwin, 1992). In a special issue of the *African Studies Quarterly* (2002), Gladwin (2002) and other authors explore the gender dimensions of fertilizer use in Sub-Saharan Africa, discussing both inorganic fertilizer and biomass-based soil fertility replacement techniques. Policymakers' interest in fertilizer voucher programs has increased recently with the successful (partly because of good rains) implementation of a fertilizer and seed voucher program in Malawi. A comprehensive evaluation of this program was completed in 2007 (Imperial College London *et al.*, 2007); in this paper we focus on recommendations relevant to female farmers.

Some of the recommendations from the Malawi fertilizer voucher scheme that would specifically benefit female farmers in other Sub-Saharan African countries include extending the subsidy to include all smallholder farmers, not just maize growers, and providing farmers with more choices of inputs and fertilizer bag sizes to buy at subsidized prices. The first recommendation would improve the program's ability to reach women, who are more likely to be smallholders, and the second would benefit poor women—and poor farmers in general—who often do not have enough cash to purchase 50-kilogram bags of fertilizer. Where women do not have enough cash to pay for fertilizer, fertilizer-for work programs can be targeted to women or fertilizer can be sold to women in small bags at lower cost. Introducing a high-value cash crop into women's cropping systems so that they can use the income from the cash crop to pay for fertilizer use on their food crops is another strategy for ensuring their ability to adopt fertilizer-responsive varieties.

Distribution of vouchers through women's farm clubs may not always be the best delivery mechanism. In Malawi, the evaluation team found that an existing local government structure already reaches all rural farming households, and focus groups with women revealed that vouchers were, in general, distributed without any discrimination by gender.<sup>3</sup> Although farm clubs used to be an effective vehicle for delivering subsidized fertilizer on credit, their reach was generally limited and most of these clubs have disbanded. Recreating this large-scale network of clubs for distribution of coupons or fertilizers would be very costly. Using farm clubs as delivery mechanisms may still be applicable to other countries, because the appropriate local organization to use will vary across countries and contexts. The suitability of existing structures to reach female farmers should be assessed prior to the implementation of any voucher distribution program.

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