

# Promoting women's empowerment in agriculture to improve the resilience of rural communities in the Sahel



## Key Messages

- Overcoming gender barriers that prevent women from accessing opportunities and resources contributes to strengthening resilience within their ecologically fragile, risk-prone communities.
- All successful resilience activities in the Sahel must be based on a transformation of the farming system through agroecology in a way that empowers women.
- Women can become agents of change for resilience with the right training and support as farmers.

## Overcome inequity issues faced by rural women in the Sahel

Women in the Sahel can play an essential role in ensuring the resilience of rural households. Men are generally the leading decision-makers in farming, but women do a significant part of the farm work, especially sowing, harvesting, and winnowing. They often have their fields and specialized crops but lack the resources, particularly secure access to land, to help ensure the food security of their family.

## Agroecology is conducive for addressing women's empowerment in agriculture

The empowerment of women in agriculture is an essential element to strengthen household and community resilience for food and nutrition security. Increased recognition of the role of women can have a broader effect on nutrition, improving rural livelihoods, and generating benefits in terms of increased food production. Men are the primary recipients of state-subsidized chemical inputs, like pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. Plots given to women are often degraded and marginal. The best recourse is to adopt practices that use ecological processes to build soil fertility.



## Case Study: Empowering Women in the Sahel

The Agroecology Plus Six (AE+6) program aims to strengthen the resilience of dryland farming systems, by empowering women in agriculture, as well as in complementary activities that strengthen their livelihoods. This also contributes to farm families' ability to counter land degradation and the effects of climate change.

The program is designed to overcome current gender barriers preventing women from accessing opportunities, such as land ownership and leadership roles, needed to help them build more food secure and resilient livelihoods.

Strategies include empowering women economically by promoting credit and savings groups. This provides them with much-needed credit and bolsters leadership, solidarity, and their influence in decision making. Support was given to help women gain secure access to land, water, seeds, and animals, as well as tailored, gender-specific technical advice and support on adopting agroecological practices. Nutrition is seen as a useful entry point to facilitate agroecology because the community perceives it as being in the women's domain. All of these strategies overlap to create a synergy between credit, nutrition education, and agroecological methods.

Fostering women's empowerment in agroecology plays a vital role in strengthening the resilience of rural communities in the Sahel. It can be achieved by progressively counterbalancing gender inequity using dialogue and culturally sensitive strategies.

## Causes of Gender Disparities in the Sahel

- Women's limited access to productive assets including land, water, credit tools, and inputs
- A low level of influence in household decisions, including in how household income should be allocated
- Restricted scope to take on leadership positions within communities



Photo: Agrecol Afrique

## Critical levers of success already exist for empowering women in agriculture.

### *Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)*

The WEIA index is a tool developed to measure the empowerment, agency, and inclusion of women in the agriculture sector. It can be instrumental in assessing the baseline problem and in measuring the effects of any intervention in addressing gender equality in a given community.

### *Women's credit and savings groups*

Rural women highly value credit and saving schemes, which many describe as life-changing. Women make weekly contributions to a collective savings pot. The women's group then lend these funds to members wishing to invest in income-generating activities or for supporting collectively farmed land. These schemes build women's financial independence as well as leadership skills.

### *Supporting women with secure access to land and livestock*

Help women secure land tenure rights by organizing public and consensual transactions of land between a willing landowner, sanctioned by a village chief and elders, and an organized group of women. Give poor rural women a chance to increase their assets through a rotation-based gift of livestock, without having to go into debt.

### *Nutrition as an enabling entry point for gender-sensitive resilience*

Adopting a nutrition lens in programming reinforces women's importance as producers and informed decision-makers, ensuring their role in improving nutrition for their households.

## Recommendations

- Both **national and local governments** should define an agricultural policy that focuses on providing women with secure access and control of productive resources and a voice in community-level decisions. Part of this means training government officials and extension officers on empowering women through agriculture. They need to promote agroecological farming practices among women.
- **National governments** need to ensure that agriculture policy adopts a nutrition lens. They also need to outline specific targets to increase the representation of women in policy frameworks.
- **Local governments** should define local development plans and budgets that focus on increasing the representation of women as extension officers. They also need to support the securing of land tenure rights to women.
- **Farmer organizations** should set targets to include a fair representation of women in their organizations, as well as to support them.
- The **non-governmental sector** must ensure women's empowerment is embedded within their organization's mission and train all staff on the importance of women's empowerment in agriculture and rural livelihoods.
- **Strategic partners** need to focus on financial support to projects that include targets and key performance indicators for women's empowerment. They need to encourage linking women's empowerment initiatives with other existing support projects.

*A practical experience in applying these recommendations is fully described in the associated [Case Study: Promoting women's empowerment in agriculture to improve the resilience of rural communities in the Sahel](#). This case study is accessible on the [Groundswell International website](#) (click here).*

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