



# **'Start calling them farmers'**

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**Five key barriers deterring the potential of women farmers in Sri Lanka**

**Targeted practical recommendations to address existing gender disparities**

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October, 2020



*Women play a pivotal role in Sri Lanka's agriculture sector although their contribution is neither recognized nor reflected in national policy frameworks. The contribution made by women in food production is critical. Women farmers in Sri Lanka are faced with numerous obstacles that hinder them from using their full potential to strengthen food systems and local economies. Ground level realities of women farmers affected by gender discriminatory policies and practices primarily lead to ambiguity in whether or not they are considered as farmers despite their contribution to the local agriculture sector. This paper outlines five key barriers which act as deterrents to women farmers: 1. Lack of access and control over natural resources, 2. Lack of access to markets, 3. Lack of access to financial services, 4. Lack of access to technology, 5. Care responsibilities.*

### **Key recommendations:**

- Amend gender discriminatory legal, policy and regulatory practices specifically inhibiting a woman's right to land.
- Reform the conditions of providing agricultural extension services where land ownership is a prerequisite to get eligibility for support services offered by the government.
- Create programs and enforce support from agriculture extension services to increase capacity of a woman farmer's entrepreneurial skills.
- Set up infrastructure including transport facilities and market spaces targeting women farmers.
- Initiate campaign on portraying women farmers as leaders, entrepreneurs and decision makers among farmer communities, stakeholders in market systems and potential buyers.
- Create low-interest loan schemes with longer repayment periods specifically targeting women-farmers.
- Equal participation of women farmers to be prescribed as a mandatory requirement for all technical knowledge and skill training programs.
- Sensitize farmer communities and agriculture instructors on disapproving social norms on male-tasks and female-tasks
- Introduction of user-friendly technological schemes for women farmers.
- Establish policy dialogues among government stakeholders and development agencies to promote recognizing and redistributing of care work among farmer women.

\*Further recommendations are outlined under each specified barrier in successive sections of this paper.

# Introduction

Women play a pivotal role in Sri Lanka's agriculture sector although their contribution is neither recognized nor reflected in national policy frameworks. The contribution made by women in food production and towards food security is critical. Women in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are responsible for producing more than 50% of food grown in the world (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011). However, women farmers globally, with Sri Lanka marking no exception, are faced with numerous obstacles that hinder or prevent them from using their full potential to strengthen food systems and uphold food security in their families, communities and countries.

The intersectionality of inequalities faced by women farmers outline multiple overlapping identities and barriers which are vastly left unaddressed in socio-cultural and political spheres. The paper identifies 5 such barriers related to access and control over natural resources, markets, financial services, technology and care responsibilities. At a macro level, women farmers are neither acknowledged or given any significance in government spending. Hence, they are faced with exclusion at two levels - as women and as small-scale food producers (Oxfam, 2017).

In Sri Lanka, even though the economy has expanded, the Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP) shows a declination from 41% to 36% in 2016 (World Bank, 2017). Ground level realities of women farmers affected by this persistent gender gap is attributable to a wide spectrum of reasons ranging from care responsibilities which disproportionately burden women more than men, to women's lack of mobility (again due to social constraints), gender biases in economic roles which hinder women from acquiring certain technical skills, accessing resources and engaging in decision making.

Often expected to engage in unskilled labour, women take on a multitude of roles in the agricultural sector in Sri Lanka. With an increase of male rural to urban migration, women in rural areas have been left to undertake more responsibilities in agricultural activities. This phenomenon of feminization of agriculture in the local context exists alongside gender discriminatory practices and inequalities which hinder women farmers from committing to their productive roles efficiently and effectively in this labour division. This brief provides recommendations to counter 5 main barriers which impact women farmers of Sri Lanka.

## **Key identified barriers hindering women farmers of Sri Lanka:**

- Lack of access and control over natural resources
- Lack of access to markets
- Lack of access to financial services
- Lack of access to technology
- Care responsibilities

## 01 . Access and control over natural resources

Women farmers are responsible for the production of 60 - 80% of food in developing countries, however they only own 2% of land (Oxfam, 2010). Gender disparities in agriculture especially in relevance to access and control over natural resources are vast. In Sri Lanka, landlessness or lack of access to land not only prevent women from participating in agriculture but also stagnates their role as unskilled workers and primary producers in value chains. Access to land and land ownership is a major contributing factor to being recognized as a farmer. Exclusion faced by women farmers in policy and practice due to lack of land ownership leads to the imposing of many barriers including accessing water, financial services, markets and extension services.

Only 16% of women in Sri Lanka own private land and ground level realities illustrate the extent lack of ownership prevents a woman farmer from obtaining agricultural assets and services as her male counterparts (Department of Census and Statistics, 2002). Despite lack of access to land, women continue to engage in agricultural activities but only in meagre capacities of subsistence farming or as daily paid wage workers in farmlands. The aforementioned activities yield a very low income and are often seasonal and irregular.

Gender disparities in land ownership is attributable to existing outdated discriminatory land laws and regulations. Inequalities in land ownership is evident in customary laws and the Land Development Ordinance (LDO). The third schedule of the LDO gives precedence to the male heir over a female heir. The succession of inheritance favouring men, especially the youngest male child of a family can be considered a severe hindrance to land ownership of rural women. Similarly, elements of Kandyan law, Thesawalamai and Muslim laws prescribe the role of decision making and controlling of land assets to males. Although these phenomena is not very prevalent in urban areas, rural farming communities rigidly abide by aforementioned traditional laws - further minimizing a woman farmer's ability to function in full capacity.

Oftentimes banks require land to be presented as collateral when offering loans. Women farmers struggle without having access to formal credit schemes and financial services. The lack of land ownership inevitably has made women farmers in the country more vulnerable and gullible to obtaining high interest loans from unregulated microfinance institutions.

The consequences of lack of ownership of land has a domino effect on a woman farmer in Sri Lanka. In the absence of a land title, a woman farmer is not allowed to register at Agrarian Service Centres run by the government. Possession of a land title acts as a prerequisite to be registered in the government system, receive extension services, market information, training, subsidies and even gain eligibility for membership in farmer organizations. Irrigation organizations would only accept farmers who own land. This deprives a landless rural woman farmer from gaining access to irrigation schemes provided by the government for agricultural purposes (FAO, 2018). Having no presence in farmer organizations and irrigation organizations would also leave out any opportunities for women to voice their concerns and overall gain a sense of identity and recognition as a farmer.

### **Recommendations:**

- Amend gender discriminatory legal, policy and regulatory practices specifically inhibiting a woman's right to land.
- Reform the conditions of providing agricultural extension services where land ownership is a prerequisite to get eligibility for support services offered by the government.
- Change the mechanism of providing membership to farmer organizations and irrigation organizations where land ownership is not mandatory for women.
- Prioritize women farmers when granting land through the LDO in order to encourage their participation in the active market economy.
- Government authorities from ministerial level to district and divisional level should prioritize resolving conflicts faced by women farmers related to land ownership and accessing irrigation schemes.
- Create a public policy discourse promoting non-land-owning women farmers to be considered as farmers and be entitled to the same government services.

## 02. Access to markets

Out of the economically active population in Sri Lanka, women comprise only up to 34.3%. Among this group of employed women, approximately 27.7% work in the agriculture sector (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). A majority of these women engage in subsistence farming and face numerous obstacles in entering into commercial levels of agriculture and occupying higher levels in value chains and gaining overall access to markets.

As this policy brief continues to highlight, the prevalence of social norms concerning traditional gender roles along with the existence of gender discriminatory policies and practices hinder a woman farmer from engaging in trade and making a presence in the market economy. The issue of mobility has been identified as a major deciding factor for a woman physically reaching markets and evaluating marketing options. A main reason constraining a woman farmer's level of mobility is her care responsibilities such as household chores etc. Lack of proper transportation and infrastructure facilities further imposes an impediment in women farmers accessing market systems and participating in farmer organizations and cooperatives. Lack of engagement with women's producer groups of the aforementioned sort further reduces access to information on market demands, market systems and opportunities for commercial engagement.

Women farmers comparatively have lesser market connections and financial resources to upgrade their farming engagement from a subsistence level to commercial levels of production and subsequently move up in value chains. Receiving market information, identifying markets, decision making, bargaining and negotiating in the overall market economy are perceived as work of men. Furthermore, women farmers rarely have access to information and services related to specialized market certifications which would enable her upgrade from being a primary producer to higher levels in the value chain.

### **Recommendations:**

- Create programs and enforce support from agriculture extension services to increase capacity of a woman farmer's entrepreneurial skills.
- Establish mechanisms to disseminate and update information to women farmers on market systems, market demands, production and retail opportunities. This too can be done via extension services, agriculture officers and farmer cooperatives.
- Set up infrastructure including transport facilities and market spaces targeting women farmers.
- Develop value addition and a market identity for agricultural produce made by women farmers.
- Initiate campaign on portraying women farmers as leaders, entrepreneurs and decision makers among farmer communities, stakeholders in market systems and potential buyers.
- Establish market linkages specifically targeting women farmers (trade fairs etc).

### 03. Access to financial services

Lack of access to financial services has been identified as a key deterrent preventing women farmers from advancing into commercial levels of agriculture from subsistence farming. The availability of regulated financial services to enable rural women, women farmers in particular to obtain credit facilities, financial capital and saving mechanisms is extremely scarce.

However unregulated microfinance companies have a high presence in rural agriculture communities and face constant criticism for exploiting and capitalizing on vulnerabilities of rural women. Over 45% of Sri Lanka's population lives under less than 5 USD a day (World Bank, 2017). Rural women farmers who often fall into this group are held back from seeking services from banks for two primary reasons: lack of collateral and inability to produce guarantors. Oftentimes loan installments are collected on a weekly basis by microfinance companies. In the current local context where women farmers already face multiple barriers including accessing markets, loan repayments scheduled on a weekly basis would only deteriorate her financial capacity.

In the event that a woman farmer is unable to repay a loan, microfinance companies usually coerce her to obtain another loan, further entrapping her in a cycle of debilitating debt. Furthermore there are reports of debt collectors subjecting women to various forms of verbal, physical and sexual violence at times when lapses in loan repayments occur.

This operating structure of microfinance companies further cripple a woman's ability to engage in productive agricultural labour. Ground level research reveals cases where women have completely withdrawn from agriculture and engaged in different forms of daily paid wage work to pay off high interest debt.

Women farmers usually sign agreements to acquire these credit services completely unaware of its content as documentation is usually printed in English. The option of getting these services from a bank is often overlooked as banks require collateral and guarantors to be produced, take a longer time to process and the approval of the loan depends on the applicant's ability to repay. The aforementioned criteria do not have a favourable outlook to women farmers who are already grappling with multiple economic and social hardships. Lack of awareness on the availability of credit schemes and financial service options, insufficiency or absence of collateral and instability of income prevent women farmers from gaining access to reliable financial services. It also hinders women from actively engaging in commercial agriculture and connecting to market systems.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Instill a strict regulatory and monitoring mechanism for microfinance companies.
- Provide supplementary information and services related to markets and value addition when credit facilities are provided.
- Create low-interest loan schemes with longer repayment periods specifically targeting women-farmers.
- Enable easy access to information on loan and credit facilities available to women farmers.
- Revise the nature of collateral to be provided as a prerequisite to obtain credit services.

## 04. Access to technology

Globally, the productivity of women farmers is notably less in comparison to their male counterparts resulting in a gender yield gap of 20-30%. If key drivers behind the existence of this gender gap are adequately addressed approximately 36 million people can be relieved from hunger (IFAD, 2014). A woman farmer's lack of access to technology is accounted as a key barrier impeding the optimum utilization of her labour in agricultural productivity.

Owing to gender discriminatory social norms, there is an obvious lack of equity in the diffusion of technical knowledge and tools concerning women farmers in Sri Lanka. Anecdotal evidence and field level findings strongly indicate that women farmers rarely get access to farming equipment and overall own significantly lesser tools in comparison to male farmers. This has resulted in the country's female agricultural labour force primarily engaging in unskilled labour, often in time consuming, labour intensive tasks and occupy mostly the bottom levels in food value chains as primary producers.

Agricultural extension services designed specifically to support women farmers too are bound by conventional gender norms. Women farmers are provided with training on subject matter related to family nutrition, household food security, forming women farmer's organizations etc. (Department of Agriculture, 2014). Farmers registered under agrarian service centres possess the opportunity of obtaining technical knowledge and training. However, being a landowner is a prerequisite to be registered in agrarian service centres, a prerequisite a majority of women farmers are unable to fulfill. This further alienates women farmers from developing technical capacity.

As per records issued by the Farm Mechanization Training Centre in Anuradhapura and Institute of Post-Harvest Technology under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture women farmers constitute for less than 10% of farmers trained from 2015 - 2018 (FAO, 2018). The lack of access to technology hinders a woman farmer in having increased productivity, gaining streamlined access to markets, effective participation in value chains and minimizing overall losses.

### Recommendations:

- Equal participation of women farmers to be prescribed as a mandatory requirement for all technical knowledge and skill training programs.
- Sensitize farmer communities and agriculture instructors on gender-biased social norms on male-tasks and female-tasks
- Introduction of user-friendly technological schemes for women farmers.
- Promoting the identity of women farmers as 'tech-savvy' via community level campaigns/activism and social media.
- Increase recruitment of female officers to provide agriculture extension services.
- Enhance awareness on how use of technology can be used to enhance productivity, effectively engage in value chains etc.

## 05. Care Responsibilities

The unemployment rates of women in Sri Lanka are more than double that of men at all age levels, and there is a large concentration of economically active women in unpaid family labor, particularly in agriculture (Asian Development Bank, 2015). When taking to account both productive and reproductive responsibilities, rural women, women farmers in particular work for more hours a day in comparison to their male counterparts.

Gender inequalities prevalent within the agricultural sector are very evident but are difficult to quantify. As women are concentrated in both unpaid care and household work and their role in subsistence farming is often unpaid, their contribution to the rural economy is widely underreported (International Labour Organization, 2018).

Opportunities available for rural women in Sri Lanka, farmers in particular are limited due to constant social responsibilities they are expected to perform. Female representation in agriculture continues to be underestimated - oftentimes women and their respective communities do not identify them as farmers despite the leading role they play in subsistence farming, and their involvement in agricultural roles as planting, weeding, harvesting etc.

### **Recommendations:**

- Establish policy dialogues among government stakeholders and development agencies to promote recognizing and redistributing of care work among farmer women.
- Create a public discourse on refraining from disproportionately burdening women farmers with care responsibilities whilst acknowledging their productive and reproductive labour contribution.
- Sensitize farmer communities on the importance of having an increased level of male engagement in fulfilling household responsibilities.
- Establish supplementary support systems at community level to relieve women farmers from traditional reproductive roles at least during selected periods within a crop cycle.

E.g:- childcare facilities, meal distribution mechanisms.

## Post-Covid reality check: Recognizing the potential of women farmers and reshaping economic policies

During a crisis situation, women and children are the hardest hit. Women farmers in Sri Lanka marks no exception to this notion. Anecdotal evidence from the field makes clear suggestions that the Covid pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and discrimination faced by women farmers. Since the Covid pandemic, there is new interest being created around local food production and shifting to primary livelihoods. The economic setbacks resulting from the COVID-19 would take a longer time, discourses in sustainable development are increasingly substantiating the claim that agriculture is the way forward if the country is to rebuild its economy. Women have the potential to be an integral component of that system not as a supplementary labour force, but as women farmers, entrepreneurs and leaders. In Sri Lanka, women farmers need to be recognized as partners of development, in order to achieve this firstly the challenges they face need to be addressed.

Food production and distribution came to a standstill in the wake of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka and worldwide. Curfews and travel bans imposed to curb the spread of the pandemic severely imperilled the livelihood of farmers, placing the country's overall food system and food security in a vulnerable state. Due to having a high level of dependency on importation, COVID-19 also gave rise to food shortages. The spread of COVID-19 has had a severe effect on the country's food system and the need to shift to ecological agricultural practices is becoming increasingly apparent. The importance of subsistence farming, local food production and supporting small-scale farmers which were thoroughly undermined by neoliberal economic policies over the past 30 years should now be reevaluated and amended.

Since embracing an open economy in 1977, there has been an exponential increase in the usage of fertilizer in the agriculture sector in Sri Lanka. This has resulted in farmers adapting unsustainable agricultural practices and letting go of traditional knowledge, refraining from crop diversification and following mono crop systems, degradation or infertility of soil, ecological disruption and spread of diseases such as Chronic Kidney Disease of unknown etiology (CKDu). The promotion of mono crops is a product of agriculture modernization. A common sentiment shared among women farmers in regard to impacts of COVID-19 is that a farmer's household facing food shortages would be an unrealistic phenomenon in their parent's generation. Farmers who only grew one crop could neither use it for household consumption as a sufficient food source nor sell it in the market due to Covid restrictions. Anecdotes from the field suggested that there is an increase in farmers switching to mono crop cultivations in Sri Lanka as there are enabling forces encouraging them to do so, from government endorsements to extension services offered.

Due to the high dependency on chemical fertilizers, women farmers had not engaged in production during the period of COVID-19 lockdown. Findings from interviews affirm that the ceasing of production due to lack of fertilizer and market access during the Covid pandemic has had a cascading effect on women farmers as their roles were mostly limited to sowing seeds, harvesting and watering. Women farmers explicitly state that the Covid pandemic not only hindered avenues of income generation, but also potentially will have a negative effect on the wages paid for female agriculture workers in a post-covid context. This is due a high availability of cheap labour resulting from a sudden urban to rural migration of predominantly female garment workers who had to return to their villages after losing their jobs in the wake of the COVID-19.

It is vital that gender is mainstreamed into national agricultural, economic and rural development policies. A public and policy discourse must be created on the untapped potential of women farmers and the importance of recognizing them as an integral part of fixing the country's broken food system. Capacities of policy makers and public officers on addressing gender issues especially pertaining to women farmers must be enhanced in aim of getting the government to respond and provide remedial measures more efficiently to eradicate discussed barriers faced by women farmers in Sri Lanka.

There is ample global evidence to prove that if a woman farmer is given the same opportunities and access to resources as male farmers, the overall productivity at the end is much higher. Loss of productivity and loss of potential income due to under-utilizing and undermining contributions by women farmers to the agriculture sector and food production needs to be estimated. The quantifiable results of the aforementioned calculation can be instrumentalized in coercing national level policy makers to take stringent action steps in addressing key barriers outlined in this paper faced by women farmers in Sri Lanka.

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