



Female smallholder farmers play an essential role in global food security

1. Challenges faced by female smallholders around the world

Smallholders often suffer prejudice and dispossession of their rights, and are plagued by poverty and food insecurity. Within the smallholder population is a group of people who face double discrimination¹: women.

Their role in the agricultural sector, however, is essential: in most countries in the Global South, they make up over 50% of the agricultural workforce. They are involved in most of the sowing, weeding, fertilising and harvesting work for crops that are staples of the family diet² (such as rice, wheat, corn). In most cases, they manage the family vegetable patches and household water. They also play a significant role in livestock-farming activities³ such as managing herds and feeding and watering animals, and in

post-harvesting activities such as processing and marketing products. In many countries, they are also responsible for gathering firewood and collecting water for the family. Women therefore play an essential role in defending food sovereignty, life and nature.

And yet, their work in crop and livestock farming is often underestimated, and their efforts are rarely rewarded, if at all. Women in rural areas throughout the world face rules and social norms that limit their income, their access to and control over resources that are critical for agricultural production and livestock farming (land, water, loans, seeds, etc.), their access to training and agricultural advisory services, and their participation in decision-making because of the low representation of women in political bodies and community bodies, and in farmers' organisations where their voices are in some cases rarely heard.

Women are also more vulnerable to environmental and climate-related crises, because

OUR KEY MESSAGES

- **Female smallholder farmers play an essential role in food security and environmental protection**, but they face rules and social norms that limit their power to act.
- **The full participation of women in the development process** is crucial to building a system of social organisation in which the roles of women and men go hand-in-hand with equal rights and fair distribution of resources.
- **AVSF empowers rural women to actively participate in development processes** by helping them become more financially autonomous and improving their social and political recognition to put them on an equal footing with men, while respecting a very diverse range of different cultural and social environments.

[1] This discrimination may be aggravated by intersectionality (indigenous groups and young people).

[2] The difference in land productivity between same-sized farms managed by women and those managed by men is 24 per cent (FAO, 2023, "The status of women in agrifood systems")

[3] In rural economies that are based on livestock farming, two-thirds of low-income livestock farmers (roughly 400 million people) are women in rural areas (FAO, 2013, Understanding and integrating gender issues into livestock projects and programmes)

they take on more domestic and caretaking responsibilities when resources are reduced. Lastly, in many countries in the Global South, women are playing a growing role in agricultural production, both for their family's consumption and for sale, owing to an increase in male migrations. In certain villages in Niger, for instance, a strong male exodus has resulted in 45% of households having a woman as the head of the household⁴. This mobility is redefining roles and responsibilities within families and societies; it presents new threats, but also opportunities for women.

This often unequal distribution of power and means has a harmful impact at global scale. According to the FAO⁵, 45 million people would be saved from food insecurity if the disparities were eliminated between men and women with respect to agricultural productivity and wages. Increasing women's empowerment in agrifood systems would therefore have a big positive impact on agricultural production, food security and the nutritional quality of foods⁶.

Through its advocacy work and direct engagements with its partners in Africa, Latin America and Asia, AVSF encourages women to actively participate in development processes and empowers women both

economically and socially so that they are on an equal footing with men, while respecting a very diverse range of different cultural and social environments. In 2023, some 61,000 women were supported through our work.

2. AVSF's approach: to ensure that women are fully included just like men in addressing development-related issues

It is essential to consider women as protagonists in the development process. Their full participation in this process is crucial to building a system of social organisation in which the roles of women and men go hand-in-hand with equal rights and fair distribution of resources.

The gender approach promoted by AVSF therefore involves more than just including women in the realisation of projects and implementing activities that are exclusively dedicated to women. The approach seeks

first and foremost to address the demands expressed by women in their communities and organisations, and to empower women while reducing gender inequalities in crop and livestock farming and in the governance of agricultural organisations and access to markets.

Promoting financial autonomy and recognition

The objective of this gender approach is twofold: to improve the financial autonomy of women, and strengthen their social and political recognition at all levels. To achieve this objective, it is essential to identify the particular roles [productive⁷, reproductive⁸ and community⁹] and needs of women and men in agro-sylvo-pastoral fields before projects are initiated. This analysis makes it possible to formulate actions that are relevant and appropriate, as outlined in the table below.

Working methods that make it easier to take gender equality into account in actions

Next page are the main tools and methods implemented by our teams in the field in order to establish the necessary foundations for incorporating gender equality into projects:

Financial autonomy	Social and political recognition
Improving women's skills in production and processing techniques, and in the operational management of farmers' organisations, processors' organisations, etc.	Improving women's skills in negotiation, public speaking and leadership.
Improving access to and control over productive resources and capital, and developing economic activities for women.	Improving their knowledge of their rights.
Supporting production and marketing under conditions that are tailored to women, in order to boost income.	Encouraging dialogue between men and women to raise awareness of existing inequalities, and more equal access to and control over resources, in the management of productive and commercial activities, etc.
Encouraging women to have control over their own income.	Providing equal support to women and men in advocacy actions targeting local and national authorities.

Table 1: Examples of activities that help strengthen the financial autonomy and the social and political recognition of women in projects.

[4] Coordination SUD, Les Notes de SUD no. 3, "Les accaparements de terres, menace pour la sécurité alimentaire", October 2010: www.coordinationsud.org/document-ressource/les-notes-de-la-c2a-n3-accaparement-de-terres/

[5] FAO, 2023, "The status of women in agrifood systems"

[6] If half of small-scale producers benefited from development interventions that focused on empowering women, it would significantly raise the incomes of an additional 58 million people and increase the resilience of an additional 235 million people (FAO, 2023, "The status of women in agrifood systems")

[7] Professional or informal-production activities

[8] Domestic and household tasks

[9] Participation in community activities, policy-making and decision-making forums

Training and awareness initiatives for the technical teams of AVSF and its partners (including farmers' organisations) to explore the complexity of this issue by linking it to the socio-cultural and economic context, and to initiate mainstreaming of the theme in their actions;

Gender assessments to identify inequalities between women and men, constraints that specifically affect women and opportunities, as well as gender relations in the crop- and livestock-farming sectors, in farmers' organisations and community organisations and in the local area, which must then be taken into account when implementing a project, at the very least in order to avoid exacerbating those inequalities;

Male involvement: it is important to initiate dialogue with men from the communities and organisations concerning their roles, existing inequalities and potential new divisions of tasks so that women can do things like develop an economic activity without being overloaded with work, but also for greater recognition of their work and their position in society. For issues relating to land, traditional authorities also sometimes need to get involved, or even opinion leaders or religious leaders (particularly in Africa).

Participation of women in project activities: this involves always being attentive to balancing speaking opportunities between women and men; taking into account the constraints affecting women by choosing appropriate times and places for activities; offering women-only meetings where necessary so that it is easier for women to speak up and for their needs to be identified, strengthening their self-esteem; offering literacy courses for fully or functionally illiterate women; lastly, not seeking parity at all costs in terms of participation, and also taking into account their daily workload in order to not overload them for the needs of the project.

Alliance with gender experts and/or specialised local associations in order to support beneficiaries with regard to

women's rights and advocacy, with a view to encouraging the social changes that are already underway.

Promotion of advocacy within our "gender and development" actions and projects targeting traditional authorities and local governments, by aligning with national state strategies concerning gender: this is essential in order to ensure that the changes achieved through the project will endure or can be scaled up (access to land, access to certain trades that used to be reserved for men only, etc.).

Gender equality is also an important issue at institutional level

Over the past twenty years, AVSF has developed various initiatives for incorporating the gender approach into its practices: creation of a gender marker for monitoring the extent to which this aspect is considered in our projects, appointment of gender experts at our head office and in some of the countries where we carry out our projects; funding of innovative actions to promote gender equality; publication of reference texts and technical papers; creation of an ethics charter and code of conduct; training of our teams at our head office and in the field, and our partners' teams; steps taken to achieve diversity on our teams, ensure equal pay, and help women and men assume leadership positions; etc.

A gender committee made up of employees and managers was created in 2021 to ensure greater consideration of gender within AVSF. The committee has developed a global action plan, which has been applied in AVSF's activities, operations and governance.

Recognising the role of women in crop and livestock farming: an important issue for the future

*"Empowering rural women is crucial if we want to end hunger and poverty. By refusing to grant women rights and opportunities, we are depriving their children and their societies of a better future."*¹⁰ In all societies, the sharing, equitable management and valorisation of resources and responsibilities between women and men is a long-term process. Its longevity is highly dependent on the teachings that are passed on to future generations. That's why AVSF is firmly committed to combating gender inequalities and promoting recognition of the fundamental role that women play in agriculture. With its partners, AVSF will continue to build on its actions in this direction so that these issues are brought to life within its organisation and in the farming communities it supports.



[10] Former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his remarks delivered on International Day of Rural Women, 2012

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Food security and rural development cannot be achieved without the participation of both women and men in the development, implementation and evaluation of projects and policies that affect them.

→ Recommendations for French public authorities

- Increase the share of public development aid allocated to agro-sylvo-pastoral projects that empower women, by providing access to and control over productive resources and capital and making it possible to generate independent income.

→ Recommendations for public authorities in the Global South

- Define and implement strategies and national policies concerning gender, with participation from both women and men.
- Promote and implement the voluntary guidelines of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) concerning gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the context of food security and nutrition.^[1]
- Fund and evaluate public, national and local programmes that seek to empower women by providing them with access to basic services (health, education, etc.) and appropriate financial services.
- Train women and girls in order to help them participate in the governance of their country, their locality and the farmers' organisations to which they belong.
- Ensure that women are paid fairly, enjoy better working conditions and benefit from all the labour laws applicable to them.
- Promote equal access to productive resources, and implement an equitable agrarian reform and redistribution of land to the people who work the land, ensuring in particular that guarantees are given to women for access to land and for stable and secure leases.^[2]

REFERENCES

Ngalu Rewbé project in Senegal

Strengthening a federation of 5,000 female livestock farmers in the Matam region, and empowering 100 vulnerable women by helping them professionalise their sheep-farming activity.

Equité II programme in West Africa

Strengthening 40 producers' organisations, including at least 15,000 women, in fair-trade supply chains for high-quality agroecological products.

AGROW project in Cambodia

Supporting more than 4,260 smallholders (60% women) to help them develop crop and small-livestock production in order to improve food security and nutrition with a "One Health" approach.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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→ *"Une position renforcée des femmes dans la filière ovine au Sénégal"* - Djiby Ba Papa, AVSF 2023.

→ *"Guide to gender mainstreaming in AVSF's projects"* Katia Roesch, AVSF 2024

[1] CFS Voluntary Guidelines: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/6dc0293c-99c6-4345-b76d-8f40ad76d513/content>

[12] Recommendations of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM), a group representing civil-society organisations within the United Nations Committee on World Food Security, on the Committee's 2023 Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment in the Context of Food Security and Nutrition