TOP POLICY LESSONS IN AGRICULTURE

Across Africa, agriculture is a primary sector of employment—and African women provide about 40% of the agricultural labor across the continent. Yet women farmers face systemic barriers to success, leading to large gender gaps in agricultural productivity that range from 23% in Tanzania to 66% in Niger. These gender gaps not only represent major untapped economic potential, but could also yield sizable gains for African economies if they were closed. For instance, in Nigeria, closing the gender productivity gap in agriculture could boost gross domestic product by an estimated US$2.3 billion and potentially as much as US$8.1 billion due to spillovers to other economic sectors. Several factors driving female farmers’ lower productivity are the time and bandwidth taxes from care and household responsibilities, limited access to and control of hired labor and other productive inputs, skills and information gaps, low financial liquidity, and restrictive social norms.

Over 90% of Sub-Saharan Africa’s extreme poor, who are some of the most vulnerable to shocks, are engaged in agriculture. In the face of crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic and global price shocks—that can exacerbate food insecurity, women farmers need targeted support and access to productive inputs that can secure their livelihoods and mitigate existing gender inequalities. Impact evaluation evidence from the Africa Gender Innovation Lab points toward policy solutions that can address many of these constraints and help women farmers reach their full potential.

DELIVERING GENDER-SENSITIVE AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICES

Agricultural extension programs are a critical tool to boost farmer knowledge and techniques; designing them with the needs of women in mind can help them reach more women effectively and close the gender agricultural productivity gap. Increasing the number of female extension agents, providing gender-mainstreaming


GENDER INNOVATION LAB

The Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) conducts impact evaluations of development interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, seeking to generate evidence on how to close gender gaps in earnings, productivity, assets, and agency. The GIL team is currently working on over 80 impact evaluations in more than 30 countries with the aim of building an evidence base with lessons for the region.

The impact objective of GIL is increasing take-up of effective policies by governments, development organizations, and the private sector to address the underlying causes of gender inequality in Africa, particularly in terms of women’s economic and social empowerment. The Lab aims to do this by producing and delivering a new body of evidence and developing a compelling narrative, geared towards policymakers, on what works and what does not work in promoting gender equality.

for extension agent training curricula, or targeting the training to both spouses can help to improve women farmers’ outcomes. GIL has tested several interventions to make agricultural extension services more effective for women that can be incorporated into large-scale agricultural extension programs.

Policy in Action: Promoting Gender-Inclusive Design in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, gender-sensitive elements were incorporated into the agricultural extension service component of the government’s Rural Capacity Building Project (RCBP). The program increased the number of female extension officers, and trained staff on specific gender issues so that agents would be able to spot potential differences in how female and male farmers respond to services. A GIL impact evaluation found that the program increased the overall area of cultivated land and the adoption of marketable crops, suggesting that access to extension helped farmers switch to more commercial, market-oriented agriculture. In areas covered by the RCBP, more people contributed to income-generating activities, which bolstered economic activity. More work was also undertaken off-the-farm. The impacts of the program benefited men and women equally; while women saw benefits from the program, it did not close the overall gender gap.2

Policy in Action: Engaging Couple in Côte d’Ivoire

In Côte d’Ivoire, the Gender Innovation Lab tested several interventions to address critical issues in the sector: that women farmers are concentrated in low-value crops, lack access to key productive inputs, and adopt agricultural technologies at lower rates. In the context of the World Bank PSAC project and working together with the Ivorian rubber professional association APROMAC, we offered farmers subsidized rubber seedlings along with a couples’ training in which the male rubber producer and his spouse jointly received training on agricultural practices, and together created an action plan to manage farm tasks—addressing possible behavioral barriers to cooperation. Recipients of the couples’ agricultural extension training had higher-quality agricultural planning, increased women’s management of cash-crop tasks, and enjoyed substantial increases in the value of household agricultural production. Farmers in the couples’ training group planted 20% more trees compared to those receiving an individual training without their spouses. The wives’ presence and participation in the creation of an action plan for rubber cultivation increased their visibility and planned responsibility in rubber production, which in turn improved the efficiency of household farm production and promoted higher levels of investment at lower cost. The couples’ training in this study was highly cost-effective, with a total cost per household of US$31, and an estimated return factor of 11x at the household level.3

Policy in Action: Building Social Networks in Uganda

In rural Uganda, an extension program used the power of female social networks to disseminate new agricultural information. In a first networking session for the program, each woman was paired with another female cotton farmer that she did not previously know. After the initial session, the women were encouraged to stay in touch and share new agricultural information about recently adopted cash crops. When compared to standard agricultural extension programs, the intervention significantly increased productivity for all women farmers except for those in the highest income quintile. In addition, there were significant spillover effects in productivity for male farmers. While further research is needed to determine what drove the increased productivity, the researchers found that women who were paired with another woman farmer had increased levels of agricultural knowledge, measured via tests. These gains in knowledge accounted for roughly 20% of the increase in yields.4

Policy in Action: Fostering an Entrepreneurial Mindset for Farmers in Mozambique

Recent GIL research has demonstrated that an innovative psychology-based training that encourages entrepreneurs and farmers to develop a more growth- and future-oriented mindset, risk-taking, and persistence can lead to large improvements in firm and farm outcomes. Building on positive impacts of personal initiative training for entrepreneurs5, the World Bank Integrated Growth

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3 Vasilaky, Kathryn and Leonard, Kenneth. 2016. As Good as the Networks They Keep?: Improving Outcomes through Weak Ties in Rural Uganda. Economic Development and Cultural Change, 10.1086/674306.


5 Personal Initiative Training Leads to Remarkable Growth of Women-Owned Small Businesses in Togo.
Poles Project in Mozambique combined agricultural extension targeted to women farmers with a personal initiative training. The agricultural extension intervention focused on promoting experimentation and adoption of best farming practices and locally relevant cash crops, as well as equipping women farmers with basic agribusiness skills to run a farm as a business. The personal initiative (PI) training focused on fostering an entrepreneurial proactive mindset (being self-starting, future-thinking, and overcoming internal barriers that keep individuals from achieving their goals) in both on- and off-farm activities. Results show that the program fostered entrepreneurship outside the farm: doubling the share of women running profitable off-farm businesses and generating important additional sources of income to the households. The training also enhanced the effectiveness of agricultural extension: leading to large increases in area cultivated and adoption of fertilizers, pesticides, good farming practices (e.g., crop rotation and mulching) and cash crops, generating greater overall value of harvest and value of harvest sold. Household expenditures increased, and results persisted after the interventions left the field.

INTEGRATING WOMEN INTO CASH CROP VALUE CHAINS OR ENTERPRISE ACTIVITIES

Across Africa, women are often concentrated in low-value crops, which limit the potential economic returns on their farms. Evidence has indicated that when women do manage cash crop plots—and have access to the same inputs and resources as men—they are able to be as productive as their male counterparts. GIL has found evidence for two promising programs and policies that can help women shift into higher-value activities: behavioral nudges for male spouses, and cash grants to couples through community livelihoods programs.

Policy in Action: Targeting Couples and Leveraging Incentives in Uganda

Many women’s empowerment interventions target women directly, with mixed results. Evidence from Uganda indicates that engaging men and women together can help foster women’s participation in cash crop production and management. Couples participated in a behavior change intervention: a workshop with topics centered on communication and cooperation between spouses, gender-sensitivity training, and women’s participation in cash cropping. A second economic intervention used a small incentive—project staff visited the households in person, and then gave households a small thank-you gift—to encourage men to transfer contracts into their wife’s name. With the encouragement, about 70% of households agreed to transfer a block to their wife—and the couples’ training further nudged some households to transfer their contracts. Overall, registering the blocks in the wife’s name led to more women interacting with the purchasing company, and increased the number of blocks held by women.6

Engaging men and women together, through either intervention, not only empowered women themselves, but also boosted their life satisfaction and that of their husbands. The behavior change intervention increased women’s empowerment through agency and achievements, such as increases in self-confidence, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and freedom from intimate partner violence (IPV), with no impact on women’s access to resources. Meanwhile, the economic intervention induced large increases in women’s access to resources (through cane ownership and management) and agency (via increases in decision-making power, for financial, agricultural, and household management decisions). Combining the interventions offered no additional benefit beyond the more effective intervention on its own, suggesting the different interventions act more as substitutes than complements. Importantly, neither of the interventions led to an increase in IPV or created adverse effects on the rest of the household.7

Policy in Action: Delivering Cash Grants and a Community Livelihoods Program in Nigeria

A program in northwest Nigeria—a region of the country with deeply entrenched norms that restrict women from working—led to strong impacts on the likelihood that women shifted their time to non-farm enterprise activities. Participants received a large cash transfer and a community livelihoods program (the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Feed the Future Nigeria Livelihoods project). After receiving the services, women became more engaged in home-based activities, like petty trading or rice crop processing. In addition, the community emphasis of the program helped reduce potential backlash from giving cash grants directly to women.8

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ADDRESsing TIME CONSTRAINTS WITHIN THE HOUSEHOLD

Most rural households in lower-income countries rely on farming as their primary source of income, and on labor as the primary input to agricultural production. However, time is a scarce resource for women farmers, who are more likely than men to care for children while working in the fields. Childcare programs can improve women farmers’ economic status—and that of their households and communities—by increasing the amount of time that women spend in the field and improving their agricultural productivity. In addition, mechanization, particularly in the form of animal traction, has the potential to raise agricultural incomes and facilitate the structural transformation of developing country economies. Beyond economic benefits, labor-saving technology might have differential impacts within the household that are crucial to understand.

Policy in Action: Implementing Childcare Centers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

In partnership with the DRC Ministry of Education, the Congolese NGO REPAFE and Save the Children, GIL piloted rural childcare centers in the Kongo Central province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to alleviate women’s childcare constraints. The centers used existing infrastructure provided by the community, and were open five days per week, 6 hours per day over a period of 12 months. Centers were open to children aged 2-6 and followed national standards and international best practices in early childhood development. Results show that demand for the centers was high, with over 70% of households provided access to the centers using them. Women decreased their need to multi-task while farming, reporting increases in their concentration, sense of control and overall happiness. Both women and their husbands increased their engagement in commercial activities, leading to large gains in agricultural productivity and broader household income. The program also revealed positive effects on children’s development.

Policy in Action: Expanding Use of Mechanization Among Cotton Producers in Côte d’Ivoire

Working with the Ministry of Agriculture in Côte d’Ivoire under the Agriculture Support Project (PSAC) GIL examined the impact for cotton producers of receiving subsidized traction kits (composed of two oxen and traction equipment) on agricultural outcomes, labor supply and human development outcomes (education, health), paying particular attention to gender differences in intra-household effects. Results show that the delivery of oxen had positive short-term impacts on household cotton harvests and sales, and longer-run gains in household cotton cultivation and value of non-labor inputs, despite large reductions in household plot labor supply by wives and daughters. Girls are also healthier, and boys are less likely to drop out of school following the introduction of animal traction. These findings imply that the adoption of labor-saving technology in male-dominant activities can have large intra-household effects and welfare impacts.

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