



**ADVANCING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN
THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR**
A HUMAN RIGHTS BASED APPROACH



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Introduction

The agriculture sector plays a crucial role in the Pacific region. With the vast resources on both land and water, the agriculture sector contributes not only towards national development, but also sustains livelihoods and provides food security for many communities. Women and men continue to play a key role in the sector, whether it be through the production of agricultural commodities, tending to animal livestock, cooking and preserving food, or overall ensuring food security for their families and communities. However, women's contribution to the agriculture sector is often not recognised or valued, nor the challenges they face in effectively contributing and benefitting from the sector adequately understood and addressed. This article explores the role of women in the agriculture sector, and the challenges they often face, using a Human Rights-Based Approach.

Women's roles and the issues they face in the agriculture sector

The participation of Pacific women in agriculture varies across the different countries and is also influenced by local cultural norms that shape the roles that women and men have in the community. However, the commonalities that exist are that women contribute significantly to planting, tending and harvesting crops that sustain many families throughout the region.¹

Despite the important role that women play in the agriculture sector they do not have equal access to land tenure and natural resources, and have limited access to training, credit and job opportunities compared with their male counterparts.² Furthermore, women are confronted with the time burden and extra responsibility of engaging in agricultural activities in addition to their normal household chores, childbearing roles and often endure poverty-level wages.³ These issues have contributed to the current inequalities between men and women in this sector.

Human Rights Based Approach to Women's role in Agriculture sector

The protection and promotion of women's human rights – i.e. the basic rights women require equally as men to live a life with dignity and respect – ensures that women are able to effectively contribute within their families and communities. The underlying principles that inform a human rights-based approach, explained herein, highlight ways in which women's engagement in the agricultural sector can be equally valued and supported.

The **participation** of women within the agricultural sector brings focus to the roles they play in the sector and the value assigned to their work, their level of involvement in decision making in the sector and the specific support they might require to equally engage and contribute. This includes understanding how wider differences in status and opportunities between men and women influence their engagement in the agricultural sector. One aspect is the multiple roles and responsibilities women have within their families and communities. This must be factored in when tailoring support to women to not over burden them as they also contribute through agricultural duties which may include both food production and preservation. The latter is particularly important in times of disasters, in the context of accelerating climate change, and now with the impacts of COVID19 requiring people to be more reliant on the national agricultural products.

Another important aspect to understand is how inequality between women and men, often expressed in high rates of violence against women, influences women's productivity and ability to contribute in the agricultural sector. Research reveals that violence against women and girls is one of the key challenges that affects the ability of women to participate and to benefit from the agricultural sector. The Pacific has some of the highest rates of intimate partner violence in the world. When a woman is not safe in their home it will also impact on the other areas of their life. Productivity is reduced and therefore there needs to be strategies in place that support women to be safe in their families and also continue to work in sectors such as agriculture.

¹Rural Pacific Island Women and Agriculture: Evidence, Data and Knowledge in Pacific Island Countries
<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2012/3/rural-pacific-island-women-and-agriculture#view>

²Ibid

³Ibid

Many countries in the Pacific are parties to key human rights treaties that provide for the equal rights of men and women to employment, to ownership of property, to decent working conditions, and so on. These rights have been reflected in regional commitments, one of which is the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration. The purpose of this regional document was to lift the status of women in the Pacific and empower them to participate in economic, political and social life. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the **link to the rights** of women is also reflected in national agricultural laws and policies, and to ensure that their implementation is sufficiently resourced.

Agricultural strategies that are being developed need to ensure **accountability to people and communities** in terms of how all community members will be engaged in the program. This requires specifically understanding and adapting programming to the different opportunities and constraints women and men face in the sector. Particularly during this COVID19 pandemic more people are now relying on agriculture to sustain their families and to also earn income. Information on support needs to be readily available to all people, recognising that women and men may have different means of accessing such information, and support requirements must not be onerous and make it difficult for women or men to engage.

Another key aspect of ensuring that women are able to continue to contribute to the agriculture sector is to ensure that women are not treated unfairly or **discriminated** against because they are a woman. Incentives and resources must be made available equally for both men and women and any discrimination between women and men should be proactively addressed.

In order for women to equally engage in the agricultural sector it is key to **empower** them with the relevant information and skills they need to make decisions or to effectively participate. Often when capacity building programs are carried out women are in the kitchen preparing the refreshments. Instead, women need to be included in various capacity building programs that are carried out in the communities. Beyond the numbers of women participating in such programs, moreover, capacity building must be tailored to recognise and address the different experiences, barriers and opportunities women and men face in the sector, to consciously work towards ensuring equal opportunities and outcomes for all.

Lastly, to ensure that women are able to equally contribute to the agriculture sector requires the **transformation of social norms** – i.e. Facilitative work in communities must build appreciation for the knowledge and contributions that women make to the sector alongside men, and respectfully challenge some of the underlying attitudes that inform what women can and cannot do in the sector.

In ensuring the inclusion of more women in the Agriculture sector and if we accomplish the above changes required under a human rights-based approach, this would add value to the sector but also provide a wholistic picture on how the skills and knowledge of those in the communities may be utilised and benefit the overall development of the country and also the men and women who contribute to the sector.

