

Women and the Crisis of Land, Food, Water, and Climate Change*

Asian Peoples' Movement on Debt and Development

In Asia, agriculture remains the main form of productive economic activity, relied upon for livelihoods by an estimated 2.2 billion people. The sector continues to serve as a major source of food and feed crops, not only in countries across Asia but the whole world.

Grassroots rural women and girls are far from being economically dependent on men as typically portrayed. They make up 20 percent of the agricultural labor force in Latin America and nearly 50 percent in East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Nowakowski). They continue to play critical roles in the whole agricultural value chain within their homes and communities, from agricultural cultivation and production, trading and vending, to food preparation, processing and storage. In the past several years, as more men exit from the agriculture, the sector has grown “feminized” in terms of the ratio of women to men.

Ironically, despite the vital contributions of agriculture to human society, agricultural regions consistently register some of the highest levels of poverty incidence in the region and the world. Agriculture and rural communities are also where around 70 percent of the world’s poor are concentrated, and where the poorest and most marginalized and excluded are grassroots women and girls <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/03/140308-international-female-farmers/> (Nowakowski 2014).

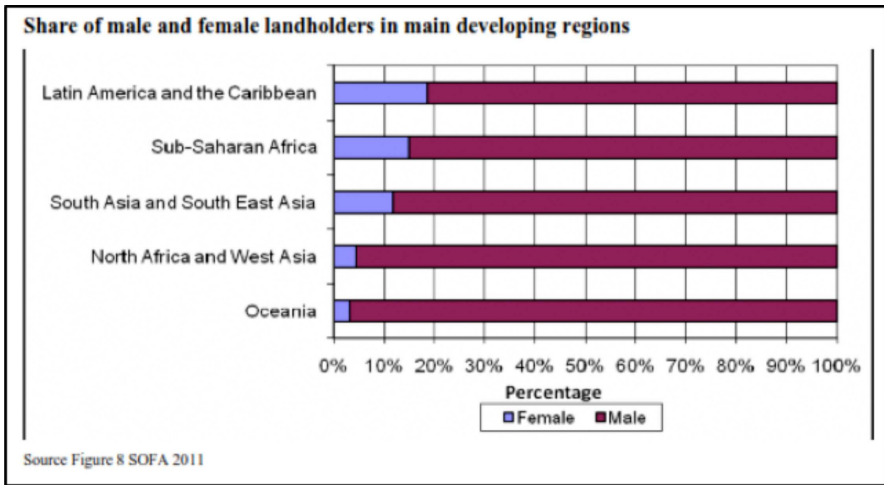
Female farmers comprise 8 percent of the world’s population, men 11 percent. Many of them suffer malnutrition and poor health, hunger



<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/03/140308-international-female-farmers/>

and other forms of deprivation. They have little or no education and remain without access to assets and resources that could enable them to rise from income poverty and become economically empowered. According to the ILO, “[a]though gender inequality varies considerably across regions and sectors, there is evidence that, globally, women benefit less from rural employment, whether in self- or wage-employment, than men do” (International Labour Organisation).

Asia remains a region where productive assets and resources, primarily land, continue to be controlled by a handful of economic and political elites. Agrarian reform and other poverty alleviation measures have primarily targeted quelling peasant unrest, and are not aimed toward genuine democratization and redistribution of assets. Thus, unsurprisingly, though rural populations in Asia vary in many respects, they are disturbingly similar



in the way they continue to be heavily burdened by widespread landlessness. Access to land as an asset and resource is even further away from the reach of impoverished women who are not only income-poor, but also face deeply rooted structural and socio-cultural impediments to female land ownership. In South and Southeast Asia, only a little over 20 percent of landholders are women; but in all the global regions, as evident in the graph below, the proportion of male landholders is over 80 percent.

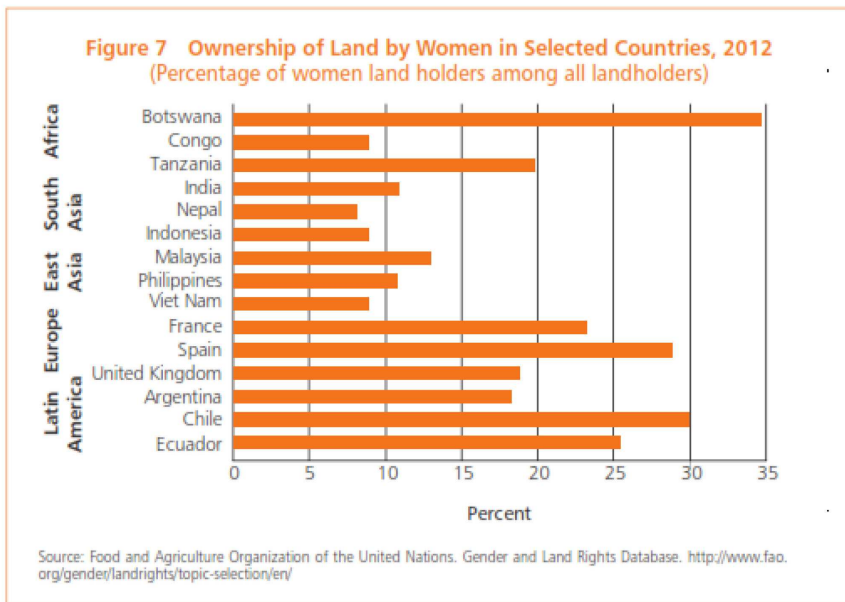
QUICK FACTS

Women comprise an average of 43 percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, varying considerably across regions, from 20 percent or less in Latin America to 50 percent or more in parts of Asia and Africa. Despite the regional and sub-regional variation, women make an essential contribution to agriculture across the developing world. Women are responsible for household food preparation in 85-90 percent of cases surveyed in a wide range of countries.

Source: "UN Women: Benefits of economic empowerment" (See <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures#notes>.)

In contexts where women do own land, these are usually smaller in farm size as compared to men. Lack of ownership and/or security of tenure over land resources are major obstacles to their economic empowerment because land ownership remains the key to many other productive resources and to social status and inclusion

The graph below places the Philippines among countries with low proportions of female landholders among total landholders.



Exacerbating the impacts of historical landlessness, governments/states themselves have increasingly been involved in various forms of land-grabbing, in line with their drive for greater foreign investments and resource extraction. Land is often forcibly taken away from rural communities and leased to transnational companies engaged in indiscriminate logging, large-scale mining and other resource-extraction activities that governments rationalize in the name of “public interest” and “development”. In other instances, small land owners without the

capacity to meet the increasing costs of farm inputs and lacking public subsidies, are forced to sell their land and are plunged deeper into debt, poverty and deprivation. They often end up working as farmers for the big land owners and are forced to make ends meet with the meagre amounts of pay they receive from tilling the soil they once owned.

Women's limited access to and/or control over land and agricultural resources also strengthens the stereotype of male-headed households (though there is evidence that women-headed households are on the rise), which can generate more practices discriminatory to women. These include constraining access to information, training, support services and credit. Women in the rural areas are more vulnerable to aggressive targeting by microfinance entities, which have rates as high as 40 percent in some countries, resulting in women's deepening indebtedness. In this manner, finance capital has come in direct contact with women, with results that debunk the rhetoric of empowerment from banks, investors and "development". The suicides of Indian women farmers is one tragic face of women turning debtors for the accumulation of others.

Rural women and girls further bear a tremendous time burden for care work, which involves not only taking care of children, preparing meals, house cleaning and laundry but also sourcing water, collecting firewood, tending vegetable gardens and collecting fuel and water. In post-disaster situations, women are also implicitly expected to make preparations for setting up living areas for family members, whether in evacuation centers or other communities.

With the climate crisis as a backdrop, even more difficult conditions threaten rural communities and particularly grassroots women producers across the developing regions. South Asia, for instance, where women comprise more than 70 percent of the agricultural workforce, rice production is feared to drop by 14 percent, wheat production by 49 percent, and maize production by 9 percent by 2050—as compared to a scenario without climate change. Losses for East Asia and the Pacific, while lower than South Asia's, are still alarming, with rice production possibly falling by 11 percent by 2050.

Many rural communities have already been forced to leave their devastated lands and livelihood, and are left with no choice but to settle in slum areas to work in the informal economy. This threat to the agricultural sector and lives of the rural people is also a threat to the global food supply.

With limited access to information and other resources to cope with crisis, women face formidable challenges whenever disasters strike. During extreme weather events and other climate-related disasters, women in certain rural communities are often discouraged from learning coping strategies and lifesaving skills, such as how to climb trees or swim, without the consent from their husbands or men in their families. Gendered cultural dress codes for women also inhibit their mobility during disasters resulting to higher disproportionate mortality. Intimidation, gender-based violence and sexual harassment are also commonly experienced in evacuation centers.

Global Crisis	Major Sources of Vulnerability for Women and Girls
Food price crisis: increased volatility of food prices and higher prices relative to income	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Female-headed households are disproportionately represented among the poorest households and among households with a high dependency ratio. 2. Comparatively lower purchasing power of women due to fewer economic opportunities related to their lower educational levels, wage disparities, and overall income insecurities. 3. Women and girls disfavored in the intra-household allocation of food. 4. Girls are removed from school first in order to reduce education-related expenses.
Financial and economic crisis	Overrepresentation of women in the sectors most affected by the slump in demand (export-dependent sectors), and concentration of women in the informal, low-skilled or semi-skilled, and low-wage segments. Women are the first to be retrenched when such crises occur.
Ecological crisis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Women directly affected as food producers heavily dependent on weather-related events. 2. Women indirectly affected by the impacts climate-related events will have on the price of foodstuffs. 3. Women's and girls' time poverty may increase as a result of the impacts of climate change on resources (e.g., water and fuelwood availability). 4. Restrictions on their mobility make women more vulnerable to extreme climatic events.

QUICK FACTS

Women farmers control less land than do their male counterparts, and have limited access to inputs, seeds, credits, and extension services. Less than 20 percent of landholders are women. Gender differences in access to land and credit affect the relative ability of female and male farmers and entrepreneurs to invest, operate to scale, and benefit from new economic opportunities.

Source: “UN Women: Benefits of economic empowerment” (See <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures#notes>.)

Climate change brings spillover effects with gendered impacts. One of these is increasing food prices which are bound to intensify as the climate crisis heightens. Women have been known to weather by subsuming their needs to their families’ welfare, reducing their food intake, and taking on various types of work in the informal sector to augment the household income.

Diminishing fresh water supply also poses serious threat to rural families, and in particular increases the difficulties women have to endure. More than 80 percent of women’s activities require the use of water including water management at the household level. Mothers and daughters take the responsibility of fetching fresh and clean water for their families from distant sources (i.e. rivers, streams far from residential areas) as well as supplying water for farming and livestock.

International financial institutions such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank claim to work for women’s empowerment but promote programs and projects that intensify conditions of vulnerability and exclusion in society and the economy. Privatizing essential services of water and energy, for example, has resulted in constraining peoples’ access; the impacts are even more severe for rural populations which are not prioritized for service delivery. The resulting burdens are borne by women who

continue to be expected to source these vital services and maintain the well-being of family members, as part of the unpaid social reproduction labors they already primarily render.

In many developing countries in Asia, socio-cultural systems and structures deeply discriminatory to women support these conditions. Patriarchal beliefs, norms and practices endure and persist, complicit in the widespread discrimination against women. Nowhere are women's rights and entitlements more stringently denied than in the realm of economic assets and resources.

**This was originally published in the website of the Asian People's Movement on Debt and Development. <http://www.apmdd.org/resources/67-ecological-debt-environmental-justice-climate-change/318-women-and-food-land-water-and-climate>*