

# Role of Women in Food Security

## Gender-Responsive Practices to Improve Food Security

---

*Nazrin Baghirova and Tarana Jafarova*

---

*“Women are responsible for half of the world’s food production, and in most developing countries they produce between 60 and 80 percent of the food. Yet, women continue to be regarded as home producers or assistants on the farm, and not as farmers and economic agents on their own merit.”*

– USAID “Fact Sheet on Food Security and Gender” (undated)

Let us begin with a few definitions and statistical observations.

A UN website dedicated to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) states (under SDG5 – Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment) that gender equality “is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world.”

Another UN website defines gender inequality as a “social process by which people are treated differently and disadvantageously, under similar circumstances, on the basis of gender.”

An EU-initiated semi-official body called the European Institute for Gender Equality describes gender inequality as a “legal, social, and cultural situation in which sex and/or gender determine different rights and dignity for women and men, which are reflected in their unequal access to or enjoyment of rights, as well as the assumption of stereotyped social and cultural roles.”

---

*Nazrin Baghirova is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University and a Lecturer at ADA University. She is a former Adviser for Strategic Planning and Innovations to the Rector of Azerbaijan State Agricultural University and Head of Unit in the Department for Education and Training Policy of the Ministry of Agriculture of Azerbaijan. Tarana Jafarova is an FAO expert and researcher on gender in agriculture and food security, an Asian Development Bank National Gender Consultant, and a National Adviser to the Ministry of Health’s Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM) run by the Global Fund. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the authors.*

The same UN website dedicated to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) states (again, under SDG5 – Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment) that, globally, “on average, women in the labor market still earn 23 percent less than men globally and women spend about three times as many hours in unpaid domestic and care work as men.”

An OECD website indicates that “people’s overall access to food relies to a great extent on the work of rural women. Women comprise, in average, 43 percent of the agricultural labor force in developing countries.”

The point here is that being present in the same market does not mean equally enjoying the same rights and equally accessing the same resources. This speaks to the issue of gender inequality in general, which has implications for the agricultural sector in particular. Thus, according to a 2015 report published by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the global challenges faced by women farmers include the lack of women’s right to food, lack of women’s right to land and water, lack of women’s equal participation in the labor market, lack of women’s access to financial services, lack of women’s access to technology, and lack of gender mainstreaming in humanitarian assistance. The 2021 Gender Snapshot report released by UN Women indicated that there was limited progress achieved in the context of SDG5, attributing some of this to the effects of the policies adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A UN Women publication from 2022 indicated that the “latest available [SDG5] data show that the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030.”

## *Think Global, Act Local*

Globally, the landmark Paris Agreement agreed at COP21 in December 2015 set a mandate for further integrating gender equality matters into the climate change action plans of adaptation measures and capacity-building activities. The website of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) indicates that “women’s contributions can strengthen the adaptive capacity of the society at large—by promoting the unique capacities of women in adaptation, it is possible to pursue the simultaneous objectives of building resilience in communities and promoting gender equality.” The same website indicates that “although women comprise 43 percent of the agriculture workforce [globally], only 12.8 percent of the landholders [globally] are women, reducing their chances to receive financing or extension services to support their adaptation measures.”

Locally, progress in gender-centric reforms in Azerbaijan has been based on the fundamental rights of men’s and women’s equality, as indicated in the country’s Constitution, which prohibits discrimination based on sex: “men and women possess equal rights and freedoms.” Furthermore, Azerbaijan has ratified various international conventions on gender equality and also various pieces of landmark legislation, including the 2006 Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights for Women and Men that

set the legal milestone for gender equality. Since that time, the country has incorporated various gender equality objectives in recent national development policies and economic strategies.

In addition, the State Committee for Family, Women, and Children's Affairs (the body responsible for promoting gender equality)—is actively mainstreaming gender into state policies, programs, and laws as well as spearheading efforts to develop information systems for gender-related monitoring. Finally, the State Statistics Committee has recently launched a new separate data section indicating land plot ownership in its gender report, in line with one of the SDG-related reporting requirements. However, despite this progress, there are still “on the ground,” implementation challenges that remain to be overcome.

The latest Country Gender Assessment for Azerbaijan produced by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) found that most of the economically active women in Azerbaijan (82 percent) are engaged in five sectors of the economy: agriculture (42.10 percent), trade (18.20 percent), education (11 percent), healthcare (6.10 percent), and food processing (3.5 percent). According to a document accompanying something called the Global Gender Gap Index, in the past ten years, the “economic participation and opportunity [level] of women” in Azerbaijan climbed from 73<sup>rd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> place globally, while the labor force participation gap of women to men went from 15<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> place globally. However, the same document indicates that the contribution of women to Azerbaijan's GDP was just 27 percent in these five sectors.

Against such a background, this IDD Analytical Policy Brief will analyze some of the “local level” barriers that rural women engaged in agricultural production encounter in their daily operations. These prevent them from being optimally productive in the economic sphere, which speaks to the larger point of ensuring food security and is thus not only of socio-economic but ultimately political and security import.

Research findings produced by one of us (Tarana Jafarova) within an FAO project conducted in the regions of Azerbaijan indicate that women farmers (especially in family or subsistence farming, with 2 or more kinds and minimum and often inadequate returns to the farmer) are among the most affected by climate change, lack of access to an adequate amount and quality of water, and to land degradation. This vulnerability coupled with the household burdens of the women in rural areas is on the increase, due to the need to carry more workload on their shoulders in the event that their husbands leave their homes for job migration or other economic reasons. As women are the first to be impacted, their vulnerability becomes a threat to food security and thus to the economy of the rural area. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, more than 60 percent of the farmers in Azerbaijan are smallholders. A 2021 World Bank report on smart villages in Azerbaijan indicates that poverty in Azerbaijan was 5.9 percent in 2021, with more than 60 percent of the poor population residing in rural areas.

Academic research, policy analysis, the findings of various international organizations (e.g., UNFPA, ADB, OECD, and USAID), the results of various interviews, and the outcome of a roundtable discussion hosted by IDD on 17 November 2023 titled “The Role of Women in Food Security” indicate the following fundamental reasons explaining the issues women face—especially for women farmers whose holdings are located in Azerbaijan’s more remote regions (e.g., Lerik-Astara, Gobustan-Ziyazen, Devechi, Neftchala, Sabirabad-Saatli):

*Limited access to finance among women in agriculture.* A 2022 USAID study found that 80 percent of women entrepreneurs in Azerbaijan experience problems applying for and receiving loans from a bank. The financial inclusion of women and their accessibility to financial resources remains a challenge, notwithstanding the progress that has been made to facilitate loan provision for women by several financial institutions and state funding entities since this study was released (e.g., the recently-launched loan project called Ipek by FINCA Azerbaijan focusing on women entrepreneurs, Bank Respublika loan line project, and ADB schemes for women engaged in agricultural work). According to a 2019 ADB report, women made up only one-quarter of financial institutions’ funding as well as state-provided loan portfolios such as AKIA and the National Fund for Entrepreneurship Development. In a 2023 FAO gender in agriculture project, one of us (Tarana Jafarova) provides two main reasons for this challenge. *First*, banks consider dealing with women as riskier, as there is less trust in women’s ability to pay back a loan. *Two*, women living in faraway and remote villages know comparatively less about the loan opportunities provided by private and state entities. Another reason is that husbands tend not to share all relevant information with their wives in such locals. All in all, this category of women has a harder time improving their financial literacy by accessing training programs delivered in the region by different governmental, non-governmental, and private organizations.

*The absence of women in familial decisionmaking processes.* This makes it harder to achieve economic empowerment, especially land ownership and increasing their share of the value chain for the production of cotton, grain, and onions. Hence, in this specialized production, the women are mostly involved as laborers, not as decisionmakers. Such disempowerment also affects the attitude of state officials and administrators towards the women farmers. As one of the women farmers put it during the November 2023 IDD roundtable discussion, “the regional administration would not just show up for the appointed meeting. They take women farmers as blue-collar laborers and not as farmers, and they’re less likely to pay attention to our problems, because women most likely do not possess the land that they work on. In some cases, they cannot provide documents of ownership and in other cases, they are not allowed to meet with municipal officials.” However, it is hard to estimate the magnitude of the problem, as there is a lack of data on the real number of women landowners. This issue is also an impediment for women farmers to receive subsidies, as the latter is provided only to those who own the land. Hence, it can only be asserted that ensuring women’s housing and land rights is essential

for their economic empowerment. One of us (Nazrin Baghirova) has written in the Winter 2022-2023 edition of *Baku Dialogues* that pre-requisites to the achievement of higher farmers' economic productivity and food security include land ownership and access to sufficient quantities of water. This, of course, applies even more to women farmers. This idea is also supported by SDG5 ("Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment"), which mandates that women farmers have land ownership equally with men farmers.

*Limited access to training programs and information services* about bank loans for women's opportunities. The foregoing is a particular problem for women farmers who live in faraway regions and remote villages, as described by several participants of the aforementioned IDD roundtable discussion. For instance, officials of the State Agricultural Extension Services (DAIM) located in the regions can barely reach those women who live in remote villages. Women farmers barely participate in various information sessions and training programs provided by DAIM and other agencies of the Ministry of Agriculture. Hence, DAIM's need for a more detailed understanding of women's needs and more flexible gender-responsive policies including, for example, mobile outreach units. In addition, according to the State Statistical Committee data of 2017, less than 40 percent of women hold higher education degrees in agricultural fields. However, those women that are educated in this field still have low representation in the production process. For example, an alumni survey conducted at the Azerbaijan State Agricultural University in 2018 by the Ministry of Agriculture showed that 80 percent of Agronomists alumni were women, however, most of them chose to work in a laboratory setting or in research institutions rather than in the field, which would help farmers (and women farmers, particularly) more directly. Finally, the lack of access to training and finance services means that women farmers also have limited access to climate-resilient farming practices and are unable to use modern technologies. This will prevent the country from using the potential of women farmers to contribute to strengthening the adaptive capacity of the society at large—that is to say, to promote the unique capacities of women in adaptation and pursue the simultaneous objectives of building resilience in communities and promoting gender equality.

## *Recommendations:*

The first step is to identify the stakeholders and the connection between them in this regard.

To that end, we recommend that the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, the State Committee for Family, Women, and Children's Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, and the Ministry of Education, together with such agencies as the Water Resources Agency, the Vocational Education Agency, and KOBIA, come together to develop a working group composed of FAIM representatives, gender experts, women farmers, community representatives from remote areas of the country, international organizations, and experts in agriculture,

water, and land management. The working group would collect information about the needs of the women farmers, the level of land ownership of women-led households, their geographic location and demographic features, agricultural product specialization, level of education and financial literacy rate, level of access to the internet, and possession of smartphones and computers.

The second step is to propose specific remedial policies. The collected data would need to confirm this, but we strongly suspect and can therefore affirm confidently that, in one form or another, the below set of concrete policies will need to be adopted:

1. Ensuring equal access to financing (loans and subsidies), which presupposes the development of gender-responsive loan and subsidy policies, including awareness-raising training programs in financial literacy and loan programs.
2. Ensuring equal access to gender-responsive extension, education, and training services, including the establishment of a Distance Education program/platform tailored for women farmers in faraway and remote regions and villages.
3. Ensuring the equal participation of women farmers in decisionmaking, land ownership, and access to water and technologies. The State Committee for Family, Women, and Children's Affairs could take the lead in this regard. Specific measures could include setting quotas for women farmer's representatives from each gender-vulnerable geographic location in decisionmaking platforms, establishing gender-responsive policies at local levels, amending relevant laws to conform to SDG5 (e.g., land ownership and banking legislation), providing for equal access to programs for technical and climate responsive technology, and ensuring equal access to water resources.
4. The State Committee for Family, Women, and Children's Affairs must ensure that gender-responsive policies are included in Karabakh resettlement projects, particularly those involving agricultural and farming communities.