

The Role of Women in Food Security

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Topics of Discussion

Food security, agricultural productivity, gender equality and equity, UN sustainable development goals, women farmers, gender sensitive policies.

Introduction

This document summarizes a roundtable discussion organized by the Institute for Development and Diplomacy at ADA University on 17 November 2023, with introductory remarks provided by Tarana Jafarova (an FAO expert and sociologist specializing in gender studies) and moderated by Nazrin Baghirova. Participants included representatives from AzerConnect, Women Empowerment Project, UNDP consultants, gender experts, Azerbaijan Women's Entrepreneurship Association, women farmers and entrepreneurs, Sara Khatun Public Union, the FAO, Lunchef Catering, and the Social Research Center.

The Current Situation

The discussions began with the introduction of the importance of the women in global food security. Hence, according to a USAID Fact Sheet, "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."

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This can be paired with a statement made by the FAO in 2011: “If women in rural areas had the same access to productive activities as men, agricultural and farming production would increase, and we could feed approximately 150 million more people.”

According to a 2019 Asian Development Bank report, 82% of economically active women in Azerbaijan are involved in five sectors of economy: agriculture (42.10%), trade (18.20%), education (11%), healthcare (6.10%), and food processing (3.5%). However, this report indicates that their contribution to Azerbaijan’s GDP is just 27% in these five sectors.

In addition, research shows that there are more informally working women in agriculture (i.e., they remain in the shadow economy). Hence, according to the State Statistics Committee, the gender ration (i.e., the ratio of women to men) was misrepresented in the agriculture sector in 2023 (23% to 47%). Jafarova indicated that her research has found that the number of women involved in agriculture in Azerbaijan is much higher than the number of men. She also noted that farmer women spend 90% of their income on meeting the economic needs of the family (e.g., food security, education of children, well-being of the family).

In short, women’s workload (i.e., housework, product production) is high whereas they have low access to agricultural advisory services. They also have low access to agricultural means of production: although women’s labor is used in almost all fields of agriculture, it is rare to see a woman as the head of the household. Other challenges include lack of access to knowledge and skills for business or economic development, lack of access to markets for women farmers (family and smallholder farmers) and marketing and branding. Lastly, the amount of land or valuable forms of property owned by women is very low.

Current Legal Framework

An overview of the country’s legal framework was also provided, beginning with reference to the Constitution of Azerbaijan’s (Article 25, Section II) prohibition against gender discrimination (“Men and women possess equal rights and freedoms”).

Progress in implementing this constitutional provision has been made in recent years. For example, a 2019 Asian Development Bank report noted that “Azerbaijan has also progressed in universal primary education and life expectancy, making it close to the average for Europe and Central Asia.” Not only has Azerbaijan ratified various international conventions on gender equality, in 2006 it also passed a Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights for Women and Men that set the legal foundation for gender equality. The more recent national development policies and economic strategies included gender equality objectives in their formulation.

In addition, the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs (the body responsible for promoting gender equality)—is active in mainstreaming gender into state policies, programs, and laws and in developing information systems for gender-related monitoring. Both women and men have benefited from these improvements.

However, challenges remain persistent on the policy implementation stage. For example, it appears that women farmers are less likely to receive credits, with no clear reason usually being provided. The State Agricultural Extension Services (DAIM) has pointed out that gender sensitivity towards the women in the regions is lagging behind. The DAIM lack representatives that would work with women separately and provide effective help on time and upon the demand, since, it is still challenging for women farmers to meet with the village administration or municipality in order talk about their problems. One participant said that “the administration would not just show up for the appointed meeting. They do not take the women farmers seriously and are less likely to solve their problems.” Another issue, according to Jafarova, is that although many of the country’s laws are gender neutral, others are not (she singled out land legislature and ownership laws). Finally, most of the women farmers are not well educated; there are very few continuing education programs for women farmers. Farmer-wives, especially, are unable to access programs for the development of skills and competences.

Participants’ Recommendations:

At the end of the IDD roundtable discussion, the participants provided recommendations, based on international best practices (including SDG5) that they thought would help the women in Azerbaijan to improve the productivity level of women farmers in the country.

- Make the agriculture credit accessibility mechanisms gender sensitivity.
- Make the land legislature more gender sensitive.
- Establish larger vocational education programs that would reach every women farmer in Azerbaijan, regardless of her geographic location.

