

Working for change

Implementing the Beijing Platform for Action:
IFAD's approach





The why and how of gender in IFAD

Links between poverty and gender inequality

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is a specialized agency of the United Nations dedicated to combating hunger and rural poverty in the most disadvantaged regions of the world, where agriculture is becoming increasingly women's work.

IFAD works to create the conditions to enable rural poor people to integrate themselves into the mainstream of social and economic development, and to overcome poverty by improving their access to, and control over fundamental assets such as water, land, financial capital, knowledge and technology. Special effort is made to remove the material, institutional and policy obstacles that prevent rural poor, women in particular, from harnessing their potential.

Rural poverty is deeply rooted in the imbalance between what women do and what they have. Building women's capabilities and addressing gender inequalities are crucial factors in enabling them to transform their lives and the lives of their families and communities.

Women must be empowered to lead the fight against poverty and hunger if efforts to implement the Beijing Platform of Action and achieve the MDGs are to be successful.

IFAD's main instruments for mainstreaming gender

- The Strategic Framework for IFAD 2002-2006, which recognizes the relation between poverty reduction and gender issues, and reflects in its objectives the centrality of gender issues as a fundamental development concern.
- The Plan of Action 2003-2006 on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in IFAD's Operations, which operationalizes the IFAD Strategic Framework and boosts the organization's efforts to address gender equality issues.

Ten years ago, in 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing. This common agenda for women's empowerment stands as a milestone for the advancement of women in the 21st century. It specifies 12 critical areas of concern that require concrete action in favour of women, including poverty, economy, education and training, power and decision-making and the environment.

The platform was reinforced by the Millennium Declaration, which commits the international community to achieve a set of development goals by 2015. The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are centred on targets related to poverty eradication, education, gender equality, health, environmental sustainability, and international collaboration.

The overall vision agreed at the Beijing Conference, together with the MDG targets have guided the work of international organizations, including IFAD, over the past decade.



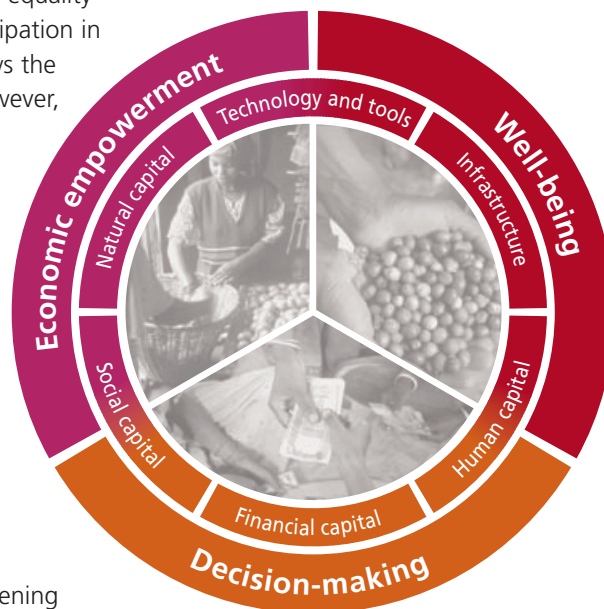
IFAD's gender approach

In its projects and programmes, IFAD combines gender mainstreaming with specific measures for women's empowerment. This means taking into account gender roles and relationships, and ensuring that men and women participate equally in, and benefit from, development initiatives. However, since women's needs, rights and interests are often neglected, activities are designed specifically to guarantee that they have the same opportunities as men, and that they participate equally in development initiatives. Gaining men's support for women's empowerment is crucial to this approach.

IFAD considers three dimensions in its work to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment: economic empowerment, participation in decision-making, and improved well-being. The diagram shows the groups of specific assets women need in each dimension. However, access to all of these assets is important to varying degrees across the three dimensions.

The three dimensions of gender equality and women's empowerment

- **Economic empowerment**
Improving women's access to income-earning opportunities and productive assets
- **Well-being**
Improving access of rural people, in particular women, to basic services and infrastructure
- **Decision-making**
Increasing women's say in community affairs and strengthening women producers' organizations



- **Social capital:** networks, trust and mutual support, formal and informal groups, collective representation, mechanisms for participation, leadership, information
- **Natural capital:** land and produce, water resources, trees and forests products, wildlife, wild foods, biodiversity, environment services
- **Technology and tools:** equipment for production (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides), traditional technology, processing and marketing methods, support services
- **Infrastructure:** shelter, water supply, energy, transport, roads
- **Human capital:** health, nutrition, education, knowledge, skills, capacity to work and adapt
- **Financial capital:** savings, credit/debt (formal, informal), wages, pensions, remittances

Rural poor women are powerful agents of change

IFAD's experience shows that:

- women's empowerment benefits not only women themselves but also their families and communities
- women are dynamic organizers and participants in grass-roots organizations, and are effective at promoting and sustaining local self-help initiatives
- farm productivity increases when women have access to agricultural inputs and relevant knowledge
- malnutrition and mortality among both boys and girls are reduced when girls get greater access to primary and secondary education
- there is a strong correlation between women's literacy and lower HIV/AIDS infection rates
- women have a strong track record as prudent savers and borrowers in microfinance programmes, using income to benefit the entire household

What IFAD has learned

Gender issues are crucial elements of IFAD's poverty reduction strategy and women are a major target group in almost all projects and programmes. A number of lessons can be drawn from the application of IFAD's approach to gender equality and women's empowerment in the three dimensions of its approach.

Improving women's well-being

Rural women give high priority to basic needs such as health services, water, education and infrastructure when consulted during planning of development initiatives. IFAD recognizes that lack of, or limited access to, essential services and infrastructure is a major obstacle to women's advancement because it prevents them from participating in the mainstream of economic development and community life.

Lessons learned

- Lack of, or limited access to, essential services and infrastructure, such as health care, water and education, constrains development in poor rural areas, but places an additional burden on women and girls due to their care-giving and other domestic responsibilities.
- Infrastructure investments have a catalytic effect, helping communities to organize around socially valued public goods.
- Change in women's workload that results from better access to basic services and infrastructure can be used as an indicator for measuring improvements in well-being.
- Women's needs must be taken into account when designing the provision of basic infrastructure and technology, because investments in social services do not automatically benefit women.
- Increasing the value of women's labour and their opportunities to work is fundamental to ensure their use of labour-saving equipment. Women do not usually invest in labour-saving equipment if they have no way to earn more income by using the labour time they save.
- Training and education for women are crucial. But, literacy, numeracy and other training programmes must cater for women's special needs and time constraints. Literacy classes build women's self-confidence and self-esteem because they provide not only basic literacy and numeracy skills, but also enable women to access broader knowledge and information, and to form cohesive groups.





Women's economic empowerment

Improving rural women's economic status and helping them build an asset base contribute to breaking down gender stereotypes. IFAD prioritizes women's economic empowerment and provides support to women in enterprise development, organizing for income generation, and in accessing microfinance, education and training, market information and markets.

Eliminating the barriers that prevent women from getting access to fundamental assets is crucial for broad-based economic growth and poverty reduction.

Lessons learned

- Secure access by women to productive resources such as land, water and financial capital has a ripple effect and must be considered a strategic approach to women's advancement. When women build assets and achieve better economic status, they develop higher self-esteem, are more visible in their communities, are more mobile, and their children are better fed. Wider impacts can include greater respect for women's rights, better ability of women to negotiate sexual relations and a consequent reduction in HIV infection, and positive changes in gender roles.
- Women see land ownership as a way to gain status and respect, not just as a means of production. Land ownership has important effects, leading women to have a more active role in community affairs and greater equality in the home.
- Tenure rights are largely customary. Women can be supported to negotiate better conditions, even under traditional tenure systems. In other circumstances, there is a need to raise awareness that certain traditional practices no longer provide the social protection that may have justified them originally.
- Rural financial services should be part of a package that includes capacity building, and must be based on an understanding of women's needs and demands.
- Women not only need access to productive resources, they need to be able to use those resources efficiently. This requires the formation of women's groups, well-focused training tailored to women's needs, education, access to markets and market information, and production support services such as extension.
- Micro and small enterprise development programmes need to tailor their support to the different needs and risk-taking behaviours of the various categories of women entrepreneurs, and to the different constraints they face. Attention should be given to the different opportunities and constraints faced by women and men, to the reasons why they are vulnerable and how they build coping strategies.



Strengthening women's decision-making

Rural poor people need to be able to influence the public and private decisions that affect their lives, if change is to be sustainable. IFAD-supported projects enable women to have a voice, by facilitating their rights of association and expression, building their awareness of their rights, improving their access to microfinance, supporting them in questioning gender stereotypes and facilitating their participation. Addressing these issues enables women to gain self-confidence and participate in transforming gender relations.

However, the challenge remains to increase women's role as decision-makers in community affairs and local institutions, a necessary step towards improving political representation and achieving the target of the MDG related to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

Lessons learned

- Women's confidence and self-esteem increase when they have greater knowledge, economic assets and income-earning capacity, and they are more likely to participate in both private and public decision-making.
- Savings and credit groups formed through microfinance programmes build women's confidence, provide a forum for discussion and action on common problems, and provide opportunities for learning.
- The use of quotas and positive action to increase women's participation in decision-making bodies is not enough to ensure their participation, but is an important first step.
- Women's groups are not always inclusive. Younger women, poorer women and women with time constraints are often excluded. Projects need to monitor and promote inclusion.
- The influence of women's groups needs to be expanded, and their sustainability ensured. Community-based women's groups that function within development projects are often unsustainable without external support and have little influence beyond the community. Projects need to promote self-sustainability and support the formation of clusters and associations capable of reaching out to decision-makers.
- Participation of women in water governance processes must be ensured.
- Innovative ideas need to be put forward if gender equality and opportunities for change are to be promoted. Experience from other development initiatives can support the spread of new ideas.
- In most countries, there are few legal impediments to women's participation in decision-making. Low participation is often due to stereotypes, perpetuated by both men and women, that assign women's influence to the private sphere, and men's to the public.



IFAD's future priorities

- **Empowering women and reducing gender inequalities.** IFAD will pursue its approach based on improving women's well-being, increasing their involvement in decision-making and empowering them economically, through the development of income-generating activities. Women can be a driving force in transforming the lives of people in their households and communities, and thus powerful contributors to economic and social change.
- **Policy dialogue and advocacy.** IFAD will give special attention to global trends that increasingly impact on efforts to achieve gender equality, and which could undermine prospects of achieving the MDG targets and the Beijing Platform for Action. It is crucial to raise awareness of the linkages between macro-level policies and the institutional and field levels. Key issues such as trade and globalization, privatization of water, HIV/AIDS, pressure on natural resources and increased conflict and insecurity threaten to further marginalize poor farmers, mostly women, in terms of access to productive resources and food security. These issues need to be closely monitored and measures taken to mitigate their effects.
- **Building broader partnerships and coalitions.** IFAD will focus on working with partners to address issues that perpetuate women's poverty and unequal status. It is important to share experience, innovations and lessons with stakeholders at all levels, including civil-society organizations, counterpart staff and political decision-makers. A culture of sharing lessons and learning together will be promoted, to foster policy dialogue and action in favour of poor people, in particular women.

Further information on gender issues in IFAD

IFAD and gender
www.ifad.org/gender

Gender-related policies and strategies
www.ifad.org/gender/policy/index.htm

Gender-related information from IFAD's regional programmes
www.ifad.org/gender/regional/index.htm

Learning from the field
www.ifad.org/gender/field/index.htm

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Enabling the rural poor
to overcome poverty