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## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH FAMILY LIVESTOCK FARMING



- Family livestock farming is one of the best ways to promote gender equality in many countries in the global South. Thanks to family livestock farming, women can create capital and become actors in the local economy. It is in fact a way to improve both their autonomy, food and nutritional security as well as their resilience.
- In order to avoid excluding female livestock keepers from their strategies, it is essential for political and economic actors to make a clear distinction between (i) agriculture and livestock, and (ii) amongst the different types of livestock farming, between family livestock farming and conventional farming.
- Given the importance of family livestock farming in the development of women empowerment, coherence should be sought between development cooperation actions and the desire to “promote gender equality and women’s empowerment”. Since family farming is at the heart of many production systems in the global South - particularly in Africa - it is vital for women that their family farms are protected against the development of agro-industrial livestock farming.

90% of all farms worldwide are family-owned and produce more than 80% of the world’s food. Within these farms, women make up almost half of the workforce (World Bank, 2017). Unfortunately, women have little access to farmland and customary law often prevents them from inheriting it. Since it does not necessarily require access to land, family livestock farming often offers women better employment options and more sustainable livelihoods (economic, social and environmental). Family livestock farming has other advantages because it is generally based on existing structures (the majority of families have at least a few chickens); and it is culturally more accepted by men for women to raise small animals such as rabbits, goats or chickens, while men rather tend to the cattle. When women earn extra money, they spend it on health, clothing, education, and buying other foodstuffs beside the ones they do not produce. Thus, they ensure a better nutritional balance for the whole family and become the guardians of food and nutritional security. In addition, family livestock farming enables women to create economic capital (through the creation of associations of breeders, group sales, etc.) that will allow them to move from the traditional domestic sphere to the local economic sphere. This new position in society allows them to gain autonomy and self-esteem. Yet empowering women through family livestock farming creates many challenges. Women often do not have the means or the social legitimacy to keep animals profitably. They have little access to credit, production equipment, veterinary care and means of transportation. In addition, domestic chores take up most of their precious time. The lack of girls’ education in general, and in particular the lack of agricultural training, remains a striking reality, as does the low representation of women in local political bodies. Since family livestock farming is a great opportunity for women, it is essential to choose the right words in development cooperation policies and programs in order not to exclude women, and to differentiate between agriculture and livestock farming as well as between livestock keeping in general and family livestock farming. In this context, coherence should also be ensured between economic objectives and the desire to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. It is of the utmost importance for women that their family farms and businesses are protected against the development of local agro-industrial livestock development and imports of animal products. Furthermore, policy makers should realize that acting in favour of the protection and development of family livestock farming is first and foremost an act to promote women empowerment and not just an economic and development issue.

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Note:  
In this document, use of the masculine  
is generic and applies to both women  
and men.

## WOMEN, GUARDIANS OF FAMILY LIVESTOCK FARMING

### Family livestock farming

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations defines a family farm as a farm where family members are the main workers. This type of farming is based on a family organization of the production process and presupposes a close link between production and family consumption. The family nucleus is therefore at the same time owner, employee and decision-maker. An estimated 1.5 billion farmers work in 404 million family farms under 2 hectares (McIntyre et al, 2009).

Family livestock farming is a sub-category of family farming. This type of farming therefore implies the same close link between production and consumption. **Worldwide, 90% of farms rear livestock and produce more than 80% of the food.**

Family livestock farming goes beyond the purely nutritional function of the animal and its products (meat, eggs, milk). It also has an economic (sales of products) and social function through the creation of jobs that reduce the rural exodus or the creation of producer associations. It has a positive impact on the environment as well: animal waste contributes to soil fertilization and is used as a source of energy (biogas). Family livestock farming also increases the resilience of households to climate hazards by diversifying production within the family. Finally, it also plays an important cultural role: animals are used as gifts during various family and religious events (birth, marriage (dowry), etc.); and the size of the herd can be the expression of a certain social status.



### Female livestock keepers

Currently, women make up almost half of the world's farmers (World Bank, 2017). They are also the driving force of village and family life in which they play a predominant role in food and nutrition. According to the World Bank, "they are the human link between the field and the plate". This linking role is made possible by the fact that these women practice agriculture and rear livestock. Family livestock farming is in fact at the heart of the production process in many countries in the global South. But women do not often have the practical means nor the social legitimacy to develop this activity.

Studies have shown that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, their yields would increase by 20 to 30 percent and the number of hungry people in the world would decrease by 12 to 17 percent (FAO, 2011). This shows the enormous potential of family farming run by women. If all development actors fail to intervene urgently in poor countries to assist women in becoming self-sufficient,

the overall development of these countries will be delayed. Moreover, this delay will have important repercussions at the economic, environmental and social levels (food security, health, education).

### Opportunities

Family livestock farming presents several opportunities to strengthen women's empowerment in many countries in the global South. More than a job, family livestock farming is **a way of life** based on culture and tradition. In both livestock farming and other areas, the roles and tasks of men and women are **culturally determined** and vary from region to region. In Africa, women usually tend to small livestock while men tend to the bigger species. This gender division of labour is generally well accepted. Depending on the locality, women manage resources such as poultry, rabbits, milk and small ruminants raised near the house. Men are mainly engaged in the care and sale of bigger livestock. This division of labour, rooted in traditional culture, thus favours the development of women in more efficient and profitable small-scale livestock farming activities.

Gender relations are fundamental to ensure social stability. In order to empower women through family livestock farming, it is therefore necessary to make men (husbands, sons, village leaders, etc.) aware of the importance of women's overall role in the economy and in the well-being of families and the community.

This awareness raising can be based for instance on Simplified Exploitation Assessments<sup>1</sup>, which measure the added value of developing farms run by women and emphasize the economic complementarity of the activities of men and women. Such awareness among men is essential for them to work alongside women, equal in human dignity and co-responsible. Men have an important role to play in this process as facilitators of change.

**Economically**, family livestock farming also offers opportunities for women at both micro- and macro- levels. In fact, supporting family livestock farming means supporting farms and families that already practice this type of livestock farming in a more or less structured way.

For women who should start from scratch, small livestock keeping does not require a lot of starting capital: the costs to buy a few chickens or some goats are quite small. Family livestock farming therefore represents a realistic investment for women, whose resources are limited and whose access to credit remains difficult due to the lack of guarantees they can offer to banks.

Moreover, some types of family-run livestock farms do not require agricultural land. For example, a woman who wants to start a chicken business in the city of Bamako in Mali does

<sup>1</sup> A Simplified Exploitation Assessment is a monitoring-evaluation tool that consists of a socioeconomic photograph of a family of breeders. Hindatou Amadou (APESS), interviewed by H  l  ne Basquin

not necessarily need to grow fodder to feed her few hens; she can buy animal feed directly. This represents a significant advantage knowing that in many countries women do not have the right to buy land and inherit it. Even though they are the head of many households<sup>2</sup>, women often have no property rights, and only have a precarious use of land. Livestock keeping thus offers women the opportunity to sustainably improve their status in society.

**At the macroeconomic level**, family farming can serve as a stepping stone for women to move from the domestic sphere to the economic sphere. In fact, thanks to the income and profits obtained, women can invest in their own economic activity while continuing to provide for their daily family needs. By increasing their income, they can create capital, invest it and become active in the (local) economy. They can do this by organizing group sales of animals (poultry, etc.) for instance or by promoting monthly or weekly payments for daily activities such as the delivery of milk from the family herd to the dairies.

**On a social level** too, a more productive family livestock farming system run by women could have many advantages. Research shows that women, unlike men, spend their money more easily on health, clothing and children's education. To give just one example, in one of the projects of Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Belgium in the Democratic Republic of Congo, women sell rabbits to pay for their children's education. At the same time, this action contributes to an increase in the overall quality of life.

When they earn extra money, women also buy food they do not produce themselves, allowing them to vary their children's meals. The empowerment of women through family livestock farming therefore also leads to **improved food security and nutrition**. By ensuring a better nutritional balance, women become the guardians of food security and nutrition and increase their resilience.

Finally, earning money, having an activity for which they are paid and moving out of the domestic sphere allows women **to gain self-esteem**. However, despite these many possibilities, several challenges still hamper the development of family livestock farming.

## Challenges

In many cultures, women are rather involved in keeping small livestock species than cattle as such. When their husband or father dies, they often inherit only part of the family herd of cattle. Even when they own it, they have little control over certain key decisions regarding the livestock, such as buying fodder, the treatment of sick animals (buying drugs), or selling livestock. Above all, they have little control over the management of the income generated by livestock. Their social legitimacy is limited because they are financially dependent on men for their economic development and their roles and tasks are defined in a traditional way.

Regardless of the type of animal species they deal with, they have less access to inputs (breed selection, fertilizers for fodder production and mechanical equipment), credit,



and financial and agricultural services. Regarding the access to veterinary services, they also suffer from discrimination: they have no/limited money and do not have the necessary information to get in touch with veterinary doctors and community animal health workers. This obviously has adverse effects on the health of their animals and therefore on the productivity of livestock. Besides, women tend to be less mobile because they do not have access to adequate means of transport, which decreases their access to markets, banks or training centres (schools). In fact, **access to education** poses a real problem for women, who make up 2/3 of the illiterate population in the world (UNESCO, 2014). This challenge is at the root of many of the challenges women face, including their political marginalization.

Finally, women can devote less time to their livestock keeping because they are occupied with their domestic tasks (search for wood, water, condiments, and preparation of meals...) and the care of the whole family.

It is therefore important to take the challenges faced by women into account when developing and evaluating policies, programmes and projects to support rural populations. The PAFEC project, run by Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Belgium in Mali (see box below), is an example of a good practice in this area. It works on each of these challenges and proposes a model to develop certain services to communities and in particular to women.

## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND FAMILY LIVESTOCK FARMING: POLICY INCOHERENCE?

In general, donors of official development aid (ODA) and actors involved in development cooperation consider gender as a crosscutting approach that should be translated into every step and every outcome of development projects and programs. This is also true for projects and programmes funded by the Belgian development cooperation.

In its strategic note "Gender in Belgian development cooperation" from 2016, the Belgian cooperation defines four priorities, including amongst others food security, access to natural resources and economic empowerment. This

<sup>2</sup> 25 to 50% of rural households are headed by a woman, due to rural exodus or seasonal migrations of men seeking employment, or following an illness or death of the husband (Le Monde Selon les Femmes, 2005)



note explains that the main aim of the Belgian development cooperation strategy in agriculture and food security is to support sustainable family farming. This objective is coherent with the strategies previously implemented by the Belgian cooperation, since its 2010 strategy note entitled “Agriculture and Food Security” already considered “gender equality and women’s empowerment” as a cross-cutting theme. However, in the new strategic note “Agriculture and Food Security” from 2017, there seems to be a change of focus. From now on, the accent is put on “the regional trade (...) stimulated in particular thanks to the access to the European market”, to the detriment of family farming, which is very little or not mentioned at all.

An analysis of the new strategic note, looking for the adjective ‘family’, teaches us that it is used only three times in the text while the word ‘entrepreneurship’ appears at least ten times. The prefix ‘agri-’, referring to the land, comes back 85 times while the words ‘livestock’ and ‘female farmer’ are mentioned two times. When we know that women own only 2% of land, any wording using this prefix excludes them from the topic. The specific choice of words is therefore decisive, and seems through this note to contribute to exclude rural women from the agricultural and food security strategy of the Belgian government.

Moreover, although regional and global trade offers real economic potential, the reality on the ground is often quite different for women. Given the challenges they face, it seems unrealistic for women to have access to regional and global markets. Therefore, there seems to be here **an inconsistency between the desire to make gender equality a crosscutting theme of the development strategy and the desire to develop an entrepreneurial and commercial agriculture, intended for export**. In fact, the development of policies in favour of export crops seems to go against the development of local agriculture and family-type farming. However, as we explained above, these are essential starting points to help rural women move from the domestic to the economic sphere, and get them out of precariousness.



## SUCCESSFUL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH VILLAGE POULTRY FARMING IN MALI: THE EXAMPLE OF PAFEC

PAFEC is a project set up in Mali to promote rural village poultry farming in order to empower women.

To implement this project, Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Belgium and its Malinese partner organisation Initiatives Conseils Développement (ICD) have surrounded themselves with different partners and associates including local private veterinarians, village poultry vaccinators, feed suppliers and government technical services. The strategy of this project was based on three crosscutting components: an economic component, a technical component and a social component, mainly focused on women. The goal was to move from unproductive female poultry farming to improved poultry farming, that is, more poultry, less mortality, more productivity per hen and market-oriented production.

The project was carried out in three phases with clearly defined objectives. At first, the aim was to improve what already existed by transforming farms: equipment, adoption of innovations and training of producers. In a second step, there was a consolidation of the gains and the opening of the market by putting the female livestock keepers in relation with the service providers and extension workers in the villages. Finally, the third phase was intended to make the system work autonomously. After five years, the results are impressive. The chicken mortality rate decreased from 39.7% to 12.6%, the number of female producers more than doubled, from 446 to 963 female livestock keepers, and overall sales turnover increased eight-fold, from 7 494 775 FCFA (11 443 euros) to 62 376 965 FCFA (95 232 euros).

But the most interesting thing about this project was to evaluate social outcomes: **have women gained autonomy** and has the project therefore increased their empowerment? In this regard, the results were encouraging and showed that the social status of women supported by the project had been strengthened a lot. The respect and appreciation they get from their families has increased thanks to their financial contribution and the economic functioning of their household. At the community level, their capacities and leadership in community life have been strengthened, which has improved their well-being and has given them confidence. Now they actively participate in meetings and parties, but most of all they are able to express themselves more freely and make their voices heard.

The success of this project therefore seems to stem from a strategy based on:

- Addressing the needs of the most vulnerable groups (rural women) and their groupings;
- Improving the level of sophistication (from inefficient to efficient production);
- Introducing a commercial approach, non-existent at first.

By offering technical changes through training and investment support, and bringing together individual female livestock keepers into producer associations, female breeders were able to move from inefficient to profitable poultry farming. It has not only increased their income, but it has also improved their status and self-confidence.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*Making family livestock farming more accessible to rural women in the global South is a real opportunity to develop their autonomy. Small livestock is a preferred option in this area since it is based on existing structures, requires a minimum investment, does not necessarily require farmland or land titles, but most importantly, because it is culturally accepted by men.*

*However, many obstacles still prevent women from fully developing their potential in livestock farming. They are not very mobile, they lack education, are often poorly represented at the political level and have little impact on the decision-making regarding their activities, their family and their community. To develop their autonomy, giving them access to inputs, credit and financial services as well as agricultural and veterinary services will be important. But first, they should be able to benefit fully from general and agricultural education and their groupings should be better supported.*

*In gender-sensitive projects and programs, the focus should also be to raise awareness amongst men on the importance of women's role in socio-economic development. In order to achieve a more balanced distribution of tasks, men must realize the extent of the work done by women in the domestic sphere. With this awareness, they can become facilitators of change in gender equality.*

*However, if family livestock farming is to play fully its role in women's empowerment, it is also essential that policies promote its development. This means eliminating the inconsistencies and incoherencies between gender as a transversal approach to any development strategy and the desire to develop an entrepreneurial agriculture. «Entrepreneurial» farming must respect the characteristics of family farming in the global South.*

*In addition, economic and political actors must absolutely differentiate between on the one hand agriculture from livestock farming, and on the other hand, livestock farming in general and family livestock farming in particular. These distinctions are crucial if we want to give a real place to family livestock farming, a stepping-stone for change that is so effective in supporting women's empowerment.*

*Finally, in order for women-led family farms to be truly supported, political and economic actors must consider livestock as an instrument to be included in gender equality policies and not only in economic or agricultural policies.*





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