

SOCIAL POLICY AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract In 2016, Uzbekistan celebrated twenty-five years of independence. Although government prioritized investment in agriculture sector, the social policy emphasized strongly institutional and organizational changes. As a result, women are mostly excluded from reforms' benefits. This paper provides a critical literature review that addresses how international gender measurement indicators and methodologies help in understanding women's empowerment and opportunities in the agriculture sector of post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Women play an important role in agricultural growth in Uzbekistan, but face persistent obstacles and societal and economic constraints that limit their further inclusion in agriculture. Mostly women are unrepresented and "invisible" in the agricultural sector in Uzbekistan because of cultural norms and gender stereotypes that undervalue female labour. Majority of women often also have no equal access to natural, financial resources and technology, and typically earn less.

Key words: social policy, women empowerment, gender stereotypes, women farmers, Uzbekistan

JEL code: P32

Introduction

This paper provides a critical literature review that addresses how international gender measurement indicators and methodologies help in understanding of women's empowerment and opportunities in the agriculture sector of post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The literature review is based on critical analyses of articles about women's farming and leadership activities in agriculture sector in Uzbekistan (Alimdjanova, 2008; 2009; Tursunova, 2008) the 2014 Asian Development Bank (ADB) Country Gender Assessment report, and two Technical Assistance (TA) reports conducted by "TAHLIL" Research Center and by "Nazar Business Technology" company.

In this paper, the authors analyse the empowerment of women in the agricultural sector through international measurement of "The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index" (WEAI) in the case of Uzbekistan. This is followed by the description of the theoretical framework using WEAI approach and the analysis of: 1) the role of women in decision-making in agricultural production at household and farm levels; 2) women's access to the financial resources and ownership of assets that influence their opportunities to set up and manage new businesses; 3) women's control of incomes and the decision-making opportunities at family level; 4) women's practicing of leadership skills in the

non-formal and formal networks; and 5) women's time allocation for the productive and domestic tasks. Finally, authors developed recommendations for the Women's Committee and ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan, as responsible implementing agencies of the state programs and international projects, which focus on decreasing of gender empowerment gap in Uzbekistan.

Theoretical framework

"The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index" (WEAI) is a theoretical approach used to examine gender empowerment indicators in agriculture for any country. The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index is a new survey-based index designed to measure empowerment, agency, and inclusion of women in the agricultural sector in an effort to identify ways to overcome the obstacles and constraints women will face (Alkire et al., 2012). In order to monitor and measure gender empowerment, Zoe Alkire and colleagues introduce significant indicators which are called "5 Domains of Empowerment" (5DE): "(1) decisions about agricultural production; (2) access to and decision-making power about productive resources; (3) control of use of income; (4) leadership in the community; and (5) time allocation" (Alkire et al., 2012).

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Domain 1: Decisions about agricultural production

Even though female participation in farming activities remains high, more often women are excluded from decision-making regarding agricultural production, at dehkans' plots (peasants' land) as well as at individual farm's management level. Gender analysis of production domain focuses on the decision-making of the agricultural production of dehkans' plots and farms.

Agriculture is a primary source of livelihood for rural population. Although women play a major role in agricultural production, they are underrepresented in groups responsible for decision-making in agriculture. The Gender Assessment Report of Asian Development Bank in 2014 pointed out that women constituted majority of water users for the agricultural production but they underrepresented at sectoral organizations such as Water Users Associations (WUA) (ADB, 2014:13).

Majority of female-farmers felt some positive changes related to the reforms in the agriculture sector. Most of female farmers were proud to say that they could pay tuition fees for their sons' higher education. On the one hand, this indicator demonstrated a positive attitude regarding the importance of education for the young generation. On the other hand, however it revealed the existence of gender stereotypes about the traditional women's role in patriarchal society. The patriarchal relationships influenced not only family relationship, but also women's access to education and natural resources such as land.

In Uzbekistan, the majority of rural population (49 %) depend on land production. That is why the land has become not only the crucial natural resource but also significant commodity. Whereas men and women legally have equal rights, cultural norms; and gender stereotypes deny women prevailing patriarchal land rights particularly in rural areas (ADB, 2014:29).

Furthermore, in rural areas the land transaction is one of the important operations.

Due to widespread gender stereotypes and lack of formal woman recognition, land ownership remains a male-dominated domain (FAO, 2013). The social survey conducted in Tashkent region also shows that Uzbek women are not benefiting equally from the recent shift towards private farms, and they are disadvantaged in access to key productive resources, such as land, water, and credit. They are underrepresented in the bodies concerned with the management and distribution of these key resources. As a result, even though majority of Uzbek women supplied their household with food from dehkans' plots and were busier with unpaid domestic work, they had no legal rights on the land (Kandiyoti 2003; Tursunova 2012). As a result, the lack of opportunities in formal sector, low contribution to the family budget, and overwhelming domestic duties decreased the chances of women in decision-making at the household level.

How can women participate in decision making at macro level, if women often have no sufficient education and are busy with domestic duties? Women's low decision-making at a micro level correlates with the macro level data. The indicator of autonomy production during the last ten years was significantly low in Uzbekistan at a macro level. For example, women farmers felt that their decision-making was absent due to authorities under the local administrations, who could order how much wheat and cotton farmers need to grow or order to grow rice, even though horticulture products would be better for their land. As a result, they received very low yield and income (ADB 2014, Tursunova 2014).

The female farmers emphasized that they could not receive credits for the processing of agriculture production because loans are mostly given for growing activities and new initiatives and plans of female farmers were not correlated with plans of local authorities and hence were rejected (Alimdjanovala 2009:9). For example,

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when women initiated the seed selection process, since the quality of seeds were poor, local authorities did not allow women to purchase raw material from other organizations, and the initiative of active farmers was rejected by local administration (Alimdjanova 2008:9).

Domain 2: Ownership of assets and credits

The next section demonstrates the access of women to natural resources and loans. Although the Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan guarantees equal rights for women, gender stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes have a strong negative influence on their performance and situate them at a disadvantaged position. As it was emphasized in the Gender Assessment Report of ADB in 2014, women have benefited substantially less than men from privatization of agricultural production and land allocation schemes. The privatization is a process that is facilitating the resurgence of patriarchal land rights, because state inaction on ensuring women's rights to property has meant that it is largely men who are in a position to acquire rights to land during privatization. In addition, cultural norms and traditions contributed to men's control of family assets. Even in the case of divorce, men tried to retain the land and dehkan plots. In the case of a husband's death, the land rights pass to the son because it is expected that he will take care of elders (ADB, 2014).

In comparison with dehkan plots, the tender system of farm registration gave more chances to men rather than women (Tursunova, 2013). Consequently, because of the special attention given to the persons who had initial capital and special knowledge in agricultural production, men occupied an advantaged position. Traditionally, majority of women are excluded from the ownership assets system. In addition, they have no equal access to natural resources and could not equally participate in the management and decision-making process (ADB, 2014). For example, in 2012, the Bukhara irrigation system

included 124 Water Users Associations (WUA), which serviced 3950 farmers (ADB 2014:5). However, as emphasized in the report, women's average participation in each WUAs was 10 %. Usually they work as accountants, administrative staff or cleaners. Still, women's representation and participation in WUAs and in agricultural production require significant steps to be involved in the formal decision-making process about water use (ADB 2014).

Women's needs are connected to social policies on water regulation. There are no specific guidelines that regulate the water distribution on an equal basis among farmers and population. Women do not participate at the decision making level in WUA; however, irrigation water conflicts are mostly linked with watering of dehkan farms where women's involvement is dominating. Furthermore, the government policy and programs on natural resources, specifically on water resources management, are generally silent on gender and make no reference to gender equality in access to land or water resources (Alimdjanova, 2008:9). State programs focused more on institutional changes rather than decreasing the gender gaps in participation and benefits from natural resource policies.

Although women play a dominant role in agricultural production, they have no equal access to the financial resources such as collateral and ownership assets. Women working in agriculture, including female entrepreneurs, represent an important economic human resource. In many ways, the issues faced by women in agricultural business are similar to those encountered by entrepreneurs operating small-scale enterprises in rural areas (ADB, 2014). For instance, female farmers generally do not hold legal titles to land and lack access to other productive resources, such as credit and microfinance. In total, the financial problems could be grouped according to the following characteristics: absence of collateral to receive a loan and of opportunities to receive cash from

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bank cards, lack of knowledge in business plan development, and registration and design of financial documents (ADB 2014). Except these difficulties, there are many bureaucratic obstacles in the banks in registration and designing documents. Usually, the majority of women are faced with lack of time to walk to get inquiries during the hot season of harvest or during the period of active field and garden work. Finally, the high rates of available credits entice women to resist banks proposals.

Female farmers and dehkans have limited access to finance, which is a major constraint for small businesses. The legal framework governing secured transactions does not effectively promote the use of movable property, which makes up two-thirds of all assets held by small businesses as loan collateral. In 2002, according to information from the State Statistical Department, 85 % of micro credits were allowed to men and only 15 % to women. The absence of cash flow-based lending processes is the major obstacle to providing credit to medium and small enterprises. Small businesses' limited business skills, experience, and knowledge also pose significant credit risks and prevent their growth. The survey revealed that only 10 % of female farmers could receive bank loans, while the majority of female farmers from Zomin region emphasized that their attempts to apply for bank credits were unsuccessful (Alimdjanova 2008 :12).

Other female farmers were faced with bureaucratic obstacles in the banks and lost their hope to receive the credit. In comparison with male farmers, women usually felt the time shortage, because they also had domestic duties to attend to. The lack of financing is one of the main constraints to develop their own farm or small entrepreneurial activities in rural areas.

Besides, studies on female entrepreneurs highlight their lack of business skills and difficulties accessing business education – both formal education and training on business start-

ups. In conclusion, all the reports proposed the business development trainings that included different basic modules such as accounting and business management to be organized on a regular basis, especially for females from remote areas in Uzbekistan (Kandiyoti 2003; ADB 2014:63).

Domain 3: Control over use of income

Although women play a dominant role in agricultural production, their participation in control of incomes at micro and macro levels are still low in Uzbekistan. Income is one of the significant indicators, which mostly identified the power subordination at the household level between husband and wife. That is why the control of an income indicator and the decision making opportunities at the household level correlated with the same indicators at macro level as well. ADB Poverty and Social Assessment report (2008) examined and presented calculations of the distribution of men's and women's incomes at the household level in a detailed manner. For example, in 2008, the TA report revealed that the role of women in the household economy is not very significant in the Narpay district of Samarkand region. On average, income from women's employment (without taking into account income from agricultural activity on family plots and incomes from non-agricultural entrepreneurship) makes up only 13 % of the total family income. Taking into account work on garden plots and social benefits (which are, in most cases, given to women), women's contribution to family income may go up to 27 % (ADB, 2008). It is worth noting that in the Narpay district, women's contribution to family income to a considerable extent consists of social transfers: old-age pensions; disability pensions; and children's benefits. At the same time, in comparison to men, almost every type of women's income is lower in both absolute and relative terms.

The difference becomes particularly vivid when comparing income from hired employment

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in non-agricultural sector, where women's income is almost three times lower than men's income. Old-age and disability pensions for women are also 1.4 times lower, which reflects lower earnings during their working years (ADB, 2008). Additionally, the necessity to take care of children does not allow women to be active on the labour market and forces them to give up looking for a job. In such conditions, women could work on a garden plot and market their own agricultural products, but even such employment is not available in the Narpay district due to irrigation water famine. Therefore, the unused labour potential of women has the most negative effect on living standards of households.

In 2013, as presented in a household survey, conducted in the framework of the "Rehabilitation of Amu-Bukhara Irrigation System", the role of women in the household paid economy is not significant. On average, income from women's employment makes up only 19 % of the total family income in Bukhara district and 14 % in Romitan district. Women contribute to family income 2.1 times less than men in Bukhara district and 2.3 times less in Romitan district. That factor is explained by low employment opportunities for women in rural areas. According to survey results, the majority (22 %) of female family members are housekeepers, while 18 % are pensioners and 18 % are students. This indicates gender misbalance in economic activity and male dominance being a main income earner. Men mostly have their own business (12 %) and work in hired positions (10 %). In contrast, majority of women are employed on farms (8 %) compared to men (3 %). Consequently, in a male-headed household, they make the final decision in 89 % of the cases. In the rest, 11 % of male headed households, there are other family members (i.e. spouse, parents, children) who make the decision (ADB, 2013).

Domain 4: Participation in the community's economic or social groups

Women in Uzbekistan are active in practicing leadership skills in formal and non-formal community networks. What is the social system in rural areas where women can exercise and practice their leadership skills? First, it is the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan, a Non-profit Government Organization (NGO). The Women's Committee of Uzbekistan was established in 1991 to provide the Government with recommendations on women's policies. This NGO is one of the key institutions urged to assist in every way to strengthen the status of rural women and provide legal support to the women, organize and conduct trainings, protect low-income families, enhanced economic opportunities. It is financed by the government and has the main authority to promote women's issues.

This organization has representatives in all administrative structures, beginning from makhalla (local community) to regional and republican levels. One of the main roles of the Committee is to promote gender equality at all levels (ADB, 2014). There are many other associations at community level such as Farmers Council, National Association of Non-governmental Organization of Uzbekistan (NANOUz) and local district authorities. However, due to different reasons women have passively participated in activities of these organizations.

Women are very active in creating, establishing, and participating in the non-formal network in rural areas (Tursunova 2013). These social networks operated also as indigenous economic networks where all participants contributed fixed funds that were given in turn to the host of the event, which they received as a lump sum payment at a future event. Tursunova observed informal socio-economic network structures of indigenous women in Uzbekistan during 1991-2012 (2013). She examined the creation of indigenous saving networks, such as gaps.

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Gap and saving networks are local and emerged during Soviet times known as "chernaya kassa" (black cash register). Women's social and economic networks often enhance leadership skills, power sharing, equity, equality, justice, and environmental sustainability in improving lives of rural people. Socio-economic networks act as a livelihood resilience mechanism in the process of changes in rural areas from gender, age, education, ethnicity, class, location, and household status dimensions. In addition, diametrically different approaches for active participation in the economic and social life were presented (Tursunova 2013). In the case study of Uzbek women, it was found that due to lack of assets, the majority could not borrow credit in the state and private banks up to the present time. In response, Uzbek women in rural areas of Tashkent created informal social networks with relatives, classmates, and neighbours (Tursunova 2014). Furthermore, the case study shows that the informal form of sharing money in Uzbekistan, the "Gap" process, is an example of mutual help through monetary sharing. The gift economy allows the redistribution of resources from richer relatives to others among kinship groups.

Gap was a space where women addressed social problems, created knowledge, and formulated actions to solve livelihood dilemmas. Women utilised gap to make meaning of events, which often involved sharing of knowledge about seeds, prices in the market, planting, and harvesting. Also, women raised concerns about social issues, such as unemployment, domestic abuse, and migration (Tursunova 2014). In the leadership domain, Uzbek women from rural areas could be considered as active participants of non-formal community networks that often respond to social and economic issues women experience.

Domain 5: Allocation of time to productive and domestic tasks

While women demonstrated their will to be active in participation at social and entrepreneurial life in Uzbek community, the time constraint could be considered as an important indicator which hampered their professional development. It was summarized that patriarchal norms of Uzbek society and existing gender stereotypes negatively influence socio-economic development of the entire society. In 2010, the Institute for Social Research and United Nation Population Fund in the social survey revealed that most of the respondents (48 %) preferred to follow patriarchal family model where the husband is the main breadwinner and the wife is considered as housekeeper and mother. However, on average 66 % of women surveyed were responsible for domestic duties: cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children. The same results regarding the time-use were received in other social survey reports in scope of ADB projects in rural areas. Due to time constraints, women were usually excluded from active participation in the labour market and consequently in the formal sector of the economy. In conclusion, although women may be interested in pursuing entrepreneurial activities and other income-generated schemes, it may be impossible for them to reconcile household activities and other income generating schemes (ADB, 2014:10).

Conclusions and recommendations

Through the lenses of WEAI theoretical framework, women's participation in socio-economic life shows that women are often disempowered in the agricultural sector in Uzbekistan. While women play a significant role in agricultural production at household and farm levels; however, women's role as active actors in livelihood and formal sector activities is unrecognized. Uzbek women still face lack of autonomy in decision-making, income control, and time allocation issues, which has negatively

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influenced their professional development. It is recommended to the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan in cooperation with Women's Committee consider to develop and implement gender mainstreaming programs and projects in the country and among stakeholders. During the planning phase to involve national and international gender experts with aim to organize gender awareness trainings for men and women in rural areas and among stakeholders.

The existing gender stereotypes prevent women's ownership of assets and the majority of women farmers are faced with financial issues in accessing credits. It is recommended to the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan in cooperation with Women's Committee to organize business trainings for farmers and young people.

Due to existing gender stereotypes and lack of professional skills, women are employed in low-income positions within the labour market. There is also horizontal and vertical gender asymmetry at the distribution of employment amongst sectors, remuneration, and education. Even though women play a dominant role in the agricultural sector, they are still unrepresented and "invisible" because of cultural norms and gender stereotypes. It is recommended to Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan in cooperation with Women's Committee to set up Women's Leadership School with aim for advancing skills and knowledge on economic and social development of the community. In addition, to set up the Association of female entrepreneurs and farmers of Uzbekistan to empower women and foster gender sensitive and responsive policies.

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