

## Women, Agriculture and Food Security in Nepal: Which Way Forward in the Age of COVID-19?

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### **Abstract**

Agriculture in Nepal became feminised over the years, due to civil war and the outward migration of men. This constrained remaining women into taking over their male family members' tasks, and added to their labour burden and drudgery. However, as gender-responsive reforms failed to materialise in support of female farmers over time, the latter remained in an inferior position in society. This has had consequences on the state of food security nationwide, as many households suffer chronic food deficiency, while the country lacks the ability to be food self-sufficient. Therefore, it is important for the agricultural sector in Nepal to be transformed, and for this to be accomplished in gender-responsive manners. The multidimensional barriers women face, both within agriculture and in society at large, must be addressed. This is particularly needed in light of the impacts of COVID-19 seen unfolding in the country, otherwise, the circumstances of women and the state of food security risk being aggravated.

### **Keywords**

Nepal, Agriculture, Gender, Food Security, COVID-19, Migration, Climate Change

### **Introduction**

COVID-19 has shed light on the fragility of our societal systems, and on the need for better preparedness and robustness in relation to them. As current systems have demonstrated

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important difficulties withstanding the stresses of the pandemic, the urgent need for their transformation has been further apparent. The latter does not simply refer to an abstract notion of building resiliency, so as to render our institutions more resistant to future outbreaks and other comparable situations. It speaks also of conducting recovery and management processes that are in keeping with a broad spectrum of needs, with longevity in mind and including a variety of relevant stakeholders, to bring about more sustainable institutions.

Such an approach is needed in Nepal, regarding the agricultural sector as it intersects with gender. In the South Asian nation comprising 28.6 million people, 79.8 percent of the population resides rurally (World Bank, 2019), relying mostly on small-scale agriculture for subsistence (Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017). The sector constitutes approximately 33 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Spangler & Christie, 2020; Upreti et al., 2018), and is heavily dependent on women's labour, employing 82 percent of the female workforce (Paudyal et al., 2019). Yet, in spite of its importance to society and the economy, food production in Nepal suffers from low productivity ultimately due to lack of access to resources and adequate support mechanisms for female farmers (FAO, 2019; K.C., 2020; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Khatri-Chhetri et al., 2020; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Nepal & Aryal, 2020; Paudyal et al., 2019; Schwilch et al., 2017; Upreti et al., 2018). This has rendered food insecurity prevalent in a number of regions, and has impacted the country's ability to be food self-sufficient (FAO, 2019; Kafle, 2020; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017). Therefore, to combat these issues, agriculture in Nepal needs to

be transformed in gender-responsive manners, by addressing the multidimensional barriers women face both within the sector and in society at large. This is particularly important, given the impacts of COVID-19 seen unfolding in the country, and the risks the crisis poses. If left unaddressed, the situation could exacerbate the circumstances of women and the state of food security nationwide (Basnyat, 2020; K.C., 2020; Nepal & Aryal, 2020).

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Agriculture in Nepal became feminised over the years, due to civil war and the outward migration of men (Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Paudyal et al., 2019; Rana et al., 2018; Spangler & Christie, 2020; Schwilch et al., 2017; Upreti et al., 2018). On one hand, a great number of boys and men were compelled to flee their homes to avoid being forcibly recruited into armed groups (FAO, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Upreti et al., 2018). On the other, they began leaving in large numbers to seek economic opportunities elsewhere and escape poverty (Basnyat, 2020; FAO, 2019; Holmelin, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Lahiri-Dutt & Adhikari, 2016; Paudyal et al., 2019; Schwilch et al., 2017; Spangler & Christie, 2020). Up until recently, more than 90 percent of outmigrants emanated from rural regions (FAO, 2019), and 1 in 4 households possessed a family member abroad who sent money home (Mandal, 2019; Sharma, 2019). This, however, resulted in dependency at both the micro and macro scales regarding the income they received (Basnyat, 2020; FAO, 2019; Holmelin, 2019; Kafle, 2020; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Schwilch et al., 2017; Spangler & Christie, 2020). At the micro scale, 56 percent of households relied on the

funds, which comprised 17 percent of total household income, between 2010 and 2011 (FAO, 2019). Meanwhile, at the macro scale, remittances constituted 32 percent of GDP in 2016, and came to surpass official development aid and foreign direct investment in the amount of foreign funds received in the country (Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017).



*Nuwakot, Nepal. Focus group discussion for WPD's RENEW programme. An example of those who remain following male outmigration. Hachette (2019a).*

Yet, the income stream did not produce significant changes in the lived realities of rural poor Nepali women. Rather, in the absence of male household members, women's labour burden and drudgery augmented (FAO, 2019; Holmelin, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Lahiri-Dutt & Adhikari, 2016; Paudyal et al., 2019; Schwilch et al., 2017; Spangler & Christie, 2020; Upreti et al., 2018). They became responsible for work culturally reserved for men (e.g., ploughing and market activities), in addition to having to

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perform their own agricultural tasks, household duties and the rearing of children (FAO, 2019; Holmelin, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; K.C., 2020; Khatri-Chhetri et al., 2020; Lahiri-Dutt & Adhikari, 2016; Paudyal et al., 2019; Rana et al., 2018; Upreti et al., 2018). Even so, the institutional response from policymakers did not materialise into the application of gender-responsive reforms to support Nepali women in agriculture (FAO, 2019; Paudyal et al., 2019). On the contrary, they have continued to occupy an inferior position in society and in agriculture, as seen through the barriers they face in accessing health, education and economic services, as well as land ownership, among other necessary agricultural inputs (FAO, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Paudyal et al., 2019). This is in spite of the central role women play in sustaining food production nationwide (FAO, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Paudyal et al., 2019; Upreti et al., 2018).



*Nuwakot, Nepal. Focus group discussion for WPD's RENEW programme. Another example of those who remain following male outmigration. Hachette (2019b).*

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Another example of such lack of inclusion, can be seen through the weaknesses existing in the development of policy, and the concretisation of instruments, to foster climate change adaptation and mitigation within agriculture in gender-responsive ways (FAO, 2019; Paudyal et al., 2019). While enduring increasing workloads and drudgery in the absence of men, combined with a lack of adequate institutional support, female farmers in Nepal have been further burdened by the impacts of warming global temperatures (FAO, 2019; Paudyal et al., 2019; Schwilch et al., 2017). Erratic weather; reduced and unevenly distributed rainfall; heightened floods and droughts; landslides; pests; significant reductions in crop yields and increases in crop failures have all been among the effects (FAO, 2019; Paudyal et al., 2019; Schwilch et al., 2017). Yet, due to pre-existing gender inequalities such as the ones mentioned above, the consequences on women and men's livelihoods have been different (FAO, 2019; Paudyal et al., 2019). Female farmers have been affected to a greater extent due to the nature, scale and intensity of their household and farming duties, combined with a lack of adequate institutional support from authorities. Together, these factors have limited their adaptive capacity in the face of the impacts of climate change, and worsened their circumstances overall (FAO, 2019; Khatri-Chhetri et al., 2020; Paudyal et al., 2019; Schwilch et al., 2017). Further, although policies exist demonstrating awareness of the relationship between gender and agriculture, and the government's willingness to address it in light also of the impacts of climate change, these have not sufficiently translated into action due to the nature of such policies (FAO, 2019; Paudyal et al., 2019). Firstly, they consider gender only in limited form, failing to outline gender inequalities in precise terms, from both a broader social standpoint and

within agriculture, including in relation to climate change (FAO, 2019; Paudyal et al., 2019). Secondly, the policies generally do not elaborate implementation plans nor include budget allocations, which are important as these would subsequently enable their adoption (Paudyal et al., 2019). Consequently, significant changes do not occur for female farmers, keeping them especially vulnerable to the local impacts of climate change (FAO, 2019; Paudyal et al., 2019).

This lack of prioritisation of women's needs, and by extension, of agriculture, has had consequences on Nepal's ability to be food self-sufficient and better ensure food security for its population (FAO, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Schwilch et al., 2017). Before the pandemic, more than half of the districts in the country were categorised as food insecure (FAO, 2019; Kafle, 2020). This applied especially to the mountainous regions, where numerous households experienced food shortages for 4 to 9 months out of the year (Kafle, 2020), as well as the western rural regions, where food deficits were chronic (FAO, 2019). This is further seen in the 18 percent of women who were malnourished in 2011, possessing a body mass index below 18.5, and the 35 percent who were anaemic, possessing low levels of haemoglobin in the blood (FAO, 2019). As for children, 27 percent of those under 5 were stunted, thereby also indicating malnourishment in their midst (Kjeldsberg et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, at the national scale, Nepal morphed into a food-importing country gradually, having prior been self-sufficient in the matter (Kafle, 2020; Schwilch et al., 2017). This is

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particularly the case with regard to rice, as Nepal was a major exporter of the grain to neighbouring nations up until the mid-1980s (Kafle, 2020). Following this period, the situation began to degrade due to the ever-increasing gap between demand for food, and societal and agricultural development. As population growth occurred, the infrastructure needed to enable greater production and facilitate transportation did not come about. As a result, the country grew in its dependence on imported foodstuff (Kafle, 2020).

On the other hand, the status of women also compounded the issue (FAO, 2019; Khatri-Chhetri et al., 2020; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Paudyal et al., 2019). Although progress was achieved in matters of gender equality, through better consideration and inclusion of women at the policy level, this did not translate into the practical realm in terms of transforming the realities of rural poor women (FAO, 2019; Paudyal et al., 2019). This is in spite of the fact that, as it has been established, the latter are not only much greater in number than urban dwellers (World Bank, 2019), but are also central to the agricultural sector (FAO, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Paudyal et al., 2019; Upreti et al., 2018). Meanwhile, research demonstrates that the degree to which women are empowered, can either hinder or facilitate food production and nutritional outcomes (FAO, 2019; Khatri-Chhetri et al., 2020; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Paudyal et al., 2019). Thus, as it relates the latter, it is important for attention to be paid to the conditions of women from an institutional viewpoint, and for needed changes to be enacted through gender-responsive measures. In such a way, the state of agriculture and food security can improve in the country.



### Conclusion and Recommendations

Nepal holds the potential to be better situated, regarding agricultural production and food security. This is seen in the nature of its population and workforce (largely rural and female); existing institutional gaps (regarding women's empowerment and agricultural production); and historical antecedents (demonstrating that food self-sufficiency was once a reality). The country's potential is further made apparent through its natural endowments, which consist of diversified agroecological zones and vast agricultural land. The former would permit the cultivation of assorted crops (Kafle, 2020), while the latter would allow for great yields, having constituted 28.7 percent of total land mass in 2015 (FAO, 2019). However, for these resources to be better utilised, the status of women needs to progress as an integral part of the process. This is because women have sustained food production in the country for the past several decades (FAO, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Paudyal et al., 2019; Upreti et al., 2018), and as such, are central to improving the sector and achieving better food security for the population (FAO, 2019; Khatri-Chhetri et al., 2020; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Paudyal et al., 2019).

The issue is in need of immediate attention, considering some of the unfolding impacts of COVID-19 observed in the country, concerning the mass return of outmigrants and the restricted flow of goods across the borders. The former implicates the loss of income from remittances; lack of employment for the returned; increased risk regarding the spread of the disease; and a rise in gender-based violence toward women (Basnyat, 2020; K.C., 2020; Kafle, 2020; Nepal & Aryal, 2020). The latter impacts food security, in terms of threatening

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internal food supply and rendering households more vulnerable to hunger (Basnyat, 2020; Kafle, 2020). Together, these societal dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis further undermine the status women in the country (Basnyat, 2020; K.C., 2020; Nepal & Aryal, 2020), and by doing so, risk exacerbating the state of agriculture and food security as well (Basnyat, 2020; K.C., 2020). Hence, there is pressing need for authorities to act.

To begin, they should identify most urgent needs (e.g., the abovementioned), and respond to them accordingly, through coordinated multisectoral effort (i.e., public, private and humanitarian partnerships), with the inclusion of women in leadership and in participative roles. This would address COVID-19's present local impacts, while putting women at the centre of the emergency response and recovery processes. Subsequently, and in keeping with the coordinated multisectoral and gender-responsive approach, authorities should begin planning and implementing reforms specifically targeting gender and gender within agriculture, making provisions to tackle food security as it relates to both as well.

Reforms should firstly incorporate policy changes and modifications, through female-centred community-level engagement and partnerships, with a particular focus on rural women. Doing so would arguably serve as a mechanism to facilitate the application of policy, and enable greater understanding of rural women's needs, and as such, shape gender and agricultural policies more accurately. Additionally, the measure could strengthen accountability on the part of authorities and serve as an additional motivating factor to help ensure that policy translates into action. The approach is manageable, as

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Nepal already relies on civil society organisations (CSOs) such as farming cooperatives, to facilitate community life and promote development (FAO, 2019; Spangler & Christie, 2020; Upreti et al., 2018). They play an important role in the empowerment of rural poor women, and serve as vehicles for diversity and inclusion (FAO, 2019; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017; Paudyal et al., 2019; Rana et al., 2018; Spangler & Christie, 2020; Upreti et al., 2018). Consequently, partnering with female-led and female-centred CSOs is essential.

Secondly, reforms should be in alignment with the principles of sustainability, to ensure that environmental needs, including in their gendered dimensions, are considered and responded to as they concern both the present and the future. Once more, this could be achieved through consultation and collaboration with female-led and female-centred CSOs, as the latter are already entrenched in Nepali society and in the lives of rural poor women (FAO, 2019; Spangler & Christie, 2020; Upreti et al., 2018). As such, the processes of transformation regarding the agricultural sector could get underway. That is, by redressing the status of women as a first step, through gender-responsive measures that tackle the multidimensional barriers the latter face, both within agriculture and in society at large. This way, the empowerment of women could also serve as a vehicle to facilitate food production and improve the state of food security in the country.

Having elaborated on these points, it is additionally recognised that Nepali society is complex with regard to its socioeconomic, ethnic, caste, religious, and geographical implications (FAO, 2019; Holmelin, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar, 2017; Kjeldsberg et al., 2017;

Lahiri-Dutt & Adhikari, 2016; Spangler & Christie, 2020). Consequently, these factors would undoubtedly shape the processes discussed above. As such, authorities, private entities and humanitarian actors would need to take such factors into account, when collaborating to improve the status of women and the state of agriculture and food security in the country. Further, the above recommendations are meant to touch on the combined issue of gender, agriculture and food security from a broad and holistic viewpoint. Thus, determining the specifics of how agriculture as it intersects with gender is to be tackled, is up to Nepali people.

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