



16 Catholic development organisations from Europe & North America



“There will be no food security without rural women” affirmed Jacques Diouf, FAO Director General. Women produce between 60 and 80 percent of the food in most developing countries and are also the main producers of the world’s staple crops – rice, wheat, maize – which provide up to 90 percent of the rural poor’s food intake. They also contribute significantly to secondary crop production, such as legumes and vegetables, which provide essential nutrients for their families and are often the only food available during the lean seasons or when the primary crop fails. Beyond production, women also play a crucial role in processing and preservation as well as ensuring supplies to intermediaries and vendors. Also, we are seeing a growing tendency towards the “feminisation of agriculture”, owing to conflict, HIV/AIDS and rural-urban migration, further enhancing the vital role of women to the sector.

Despite this significant contribution, women’s role in agriculture suffers from severe gender biases. Whilst women are not a homogeneous group, indicators the world over demonstrate they have unequal access to capital (notably credit), legal and social ownership rights (land in particular) and inequalities in access to productive resources and services (including agricultural extension services, training, technology and market information). Women’s higher rates of illiteracy lead to exclusion from new market opportunities, while women farmers are often neglected by policy makers and their contribution to agriculture is not properly valued. What has been termed “gender exploitative integration”, limits women’s participation in export-oriented agriculture, and also larger scale trading and marketing domestically; rendering to them the ignoble position of cheap and often unremunerated labor.

CIDSE is a network of 16 Catholic development and humanitarian agencies from Europe and North America with liaison status at the FAO, actively involved in food issues since the 1960s and closely engaged in the developments of the CFS reform (www.cidse.org). We believe such gender biases constrain women’s ability to contribute fully to the food security of their countries and in turn trap them in low-productivity, low-growth economic activities. Recognizing the importance of their role, addressing the disparities in access to productive resources and giving women the long overdue attention in training and extension support is thus essential if we are to meet the food challenges of the future.