



Factsheet: Women Workers in Agro-Industry

The rapid spread of modern supply chains in developing countries is profoundly changing the way food is produced and traded. One result is the increasing number of women workers in agro-industrial production.

Women workers are replacing men in the least-secure, worst-paid and most labor-intensive farm jobs. Spurred by the necessity to financially support their families and the lack of available jobs near their homes, rural women in developing countries are relocating from their homes to work [on commercial farms or in agricultural processing plants](#).

Agriculture remains [the most important source of employment](#) for women in low-income and lower- and middle-income countries.

Feminization of Agro-Industry

- [564 million women](#) work in agriculture.
- In some areas, women make up a majority of agricultural workers: In south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, [more than 60 percent](#) of all working women are in agriculture.
- On average, women comprise about [43 percent of the agricultural labor force](#) in developing countries.
- Women account for [two-thirds of the world's 600 million livestock keepers](#).
- One-third of the world's total female population is [employed in agriculture](#), either on privately owned farms or as wage workers on commercial farms.
- Some [16.7 million women migrants](#) work in agriculture.
- Women contribute between [38 percent and 46 percent](#) of the world's agricultural output.
- Women will be key to meeting the needs of the world's growing population: By 2030, global food demand [is expected to rise by 35 percent](#).

Women Agricultural Workers Face Dangerous, Unhealthy Conditions

- In commercial agriculture, women are predominantly concentrated in [temporary, informal and seasonal jobs](#), where they [receive low wages and few or no benefits](#), and are exposed to dangerous and unsafe working conditions.
- Women increasingly are employed in the [agricultural export sector](#), such as commodities and horticulture, where [temporary, seasonal and casual jobs are the norm](#). There, they work long hours to fulfill production goals, often without safety equipment or protection from hazardous chemicals. Women farm workers often labor alone in fields, where they are vulnerable to sexual harassment, physical abuse and rape. For instance, at least [55 percent of female flower workers in Ecuador](#) have suffered some form of sexual harassment.

- In addition to sexual harassment, women disproportionately face other forms of gender-based violence and discrimination at work. For Example, they are forced to take pregnancy tests and, if pregnant, fired.
- Women who continue to work throughout a pregnancy risk birth complications due to chemical exposure. And mothers must contend with limited options for child care while on the job.
- Because women often are forced to work in the most labor-intensive agricultural jobs [with the least safety protection](#), they are [disproportionately exposed to chemicals](#) during storage, mixing and spraying, and when pesticides are used in confined spaces, such as greenhouses and packinghouses. In the short term, such exposure may lead to skin irritation, respiratory problems, nausea and dizziness. Longer-term effects include damage to reproductive organs and unborn children.

Unequal Access to Advancement for Women Agricultural Workers

- Higher skilled, permanent positions, such as operating heavy farm equipment, often are reserved for men. Even when women have comparable positions with men, their wages lag—up to 50 percent less than their male co-workers. Some employers even require a male family member to collect a woman’s paycheck.
- Women have less access to training and vocational courses and [face discrimination in allocation of benefits, such as housing](#), even though many are the sole breadwinner.
- Women may spend [less time on farm work but work longer total hours on productive and household work](#) and paid and unpaid work, due to gender-based division of labor in child care and household responsibilities.

Women Agricultural Workers Make Gains through Unions

- More than 1,200 agriculture workers—many of whom participated in Solidarity Center gender equality training and support—on six commercial farms in Meknes, Morocco, are [covered by a collective bargaining agreement](#). The contract, reached with agro-industry employer Les Domaines Brahim Zniber [in 2015](#), includes first-ever maternity leave, a key demand of the women workers, and ensures women receive training opportunities equal to men. Previously, women were blocked from “male” jobs, like truck driving.
- In Peru, a Solidarity Center program to [empower women farm workers](#) strengthened women’s leadership skills and enabled them to educate women co-workers on their rights at work, advocate for workplace safety with their employers and meet with government officials to urge literacy programs for working women.
- Working with the Solidarity Center, the Borno state chapter of the Agricultural and Allied Employees Union of Nigeria (AAEUN) elected a women’s committee to strengthen participation in agricultural programs to enable women affected by Boko Haram insurgency to support their families.
- With Solidarity Center support, Honduran agricultural leaders [connected with their peers across Central and South America to achieve better wages and working conditions](#) through a regional agenda. They developed a contract template with 20 clauses that address women’s specific concerns, for use in negotiations. With the IUF global union, the unions negotiated a regional framework agreement with Chiquita that includes a zero-tolerance policy for workplace sexual harassment.