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Promoting female leadership in agricultural value chains



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All blogs

Although women are the backbone of the agricultural sector, they often lack access to capital and agricultural training, making it impossible to invest in their farm activities.

In Rwanda's [STARS programme](#), producer organisations (POs) have played a key role when it comes to encouraging female rice and maize farmers to take leadership positions within their cooperatives.

Our latest report - [Starring women: towards more inclusive agricultural services across Africa](#) - focuses on our work towards more inclusive agricultural services in Rwanda, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Ethiopia. In this blog we zoom in on one of the report's examples in Rwanda.

The problem – women lack control over their income

While women in Rwanda are instrumental to agricultural production, they are predominantly active in activities such as planting, weeding and harvesting. They are less involved in the post-harvest activities of processing and marketing their products.

Women are also under-represented in leadership roles in most maize and rice POs in Rwanda. Consequently, they are less involved in negotiating prices and the sale of produce. Ultimately that means that they are often forced to rely on receiving payment through their husbands, lending women little agency over their income.

As a STARS' team member explains: "Women do not participate sufficiently in sales and marketing of the crops because they lack market negotiation skills. Also, household activities are limiting them to search for market information. Therefore, empowering women with such skills will help them become more involved in the market aspects of the value chain."

From the beginning, the programme promoted female inclusion in its agricultural value chains and access to financial services.

Leadership in producer organisations

By having more women leaders in POs, STARS aimed to raise awareness of how women contribute to agriculture.

It strategically encouraged partner POs to put in place internal rules and bylaws to recognise and establish gender committees. These committees were trained on the rules, regulations and management of the PO, as well as gender equity, equality and gender conflict management.

These gender committees became active advocates for female members to participate in PO management; sensitising members on the importance of having women in their leadership.

"We learned a lot from ICCO's STARS training. We learned the importance of supporting our wives and working together with them in all production phases until the selling time. We have made our wives more responsible and powerful and the whole family benefits from it." *Male farmer in Rwanda*

As a result, elections were organised and more women were elected to be part of the PO management (from 20 per cent up to 40 per cent).

"Thanks to the newly acquired skills as part of the gender committee, I was confident enough to campaign in the following election and I am now the secretary in my PO. I have a word in the management of the cooperative." *Maize farmer in Impabaruta PO*

Changing mindsets

As more women started to participate in PO leadership roles, STARS conducted a series of training events to improve their skills in leadership, management, access to market information, negotiation and the management of buyers' contracts.

This helped them get involved in decision-making on marketing, price negotiations and sales. They were also able to advocate for female farmers to receive payments for the sales of their produce directly, instead of through their husbands. Moreover, some women have become more confident to participate in local governance in their sectors and districts.

“Before, we were convinced that our personal and household income had to be controlled and managed by our husbands, who would also decide on women’s needs. Fortunately, after being trained by ICCO, us women, we have understood our full rights to decide on how we can use and control income generated from our production.” *Female farmer in Rwanda*

Access to agri-loans

To address the financial bottlenecks women face, the project also worked with microfinance institutions in the four countries to develop loans that fit the specific needs of female farmers.

STARS initiated several interventions in a bid to make agricultural lending attractive to MFIs. One of these was the development of tailor-made agri-credit products and the refining of the existing non-performing agri-products. The results were good - by the end of 2020 STARS provided over 300,000 loans of which 55 per cent went to female farmers.

“We trained MFIs to understand agriculture much better, as a result the loan officers with a finance background now understand the language of the farmer with the agriculture background,” said Patrick Birasa, the STARS country lead in Rwanda.

“Before the STARS programme, I was fearing being rejected by financial institutions. However, I was lacking capital to invest in farming. When I decided to work with them, I was able to get inputs, to grow on time, to increase my production and this has allowed me to invest more in farming and to extend my land from 25 to 37 are.” *Female farmer in Rwanda*

As the programme is coming to an end, overall, 55 per cent of loans supported by STARS were provided to women; both to groups and individual borrowers.

About the author

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About STARS

Strengthening African Rural Smallholders (STARS) is a five-year (2017-2021)

programme in partnership with Mastercard Foundation. Through a market system development (MSD) approach, STARS puts a focus on access to finance and value chain development with the aim to improve food security and wellbeing of over 200,000 smallholder farmers in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Senegal. [View the STARS profile](#)

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