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# HERSELF:

## CLOSING THE GENDER GAP

By Alexandra Speildoch, CEO  
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Today, 821 million people are hungry and one billion people are living in poverty. One-fourth of Sub-Saharan Africa is food insecure and smallholder farmers are the most vulnerable. At the same time, millions of young Africans are in search of employment. More people are moving to the cities that can't find jobs in the rural areas. The African population is also exploding, which puts new strain on the environment and the economy. However, Africa is changing rapidly with all kinds of emerging opportunity across sectors. This includes new employment opportunities in rural communities to save and transport food, and new demand among consumers in national and regional food markets for a broad array of food products.

Though Africa is facing some of the biggest development challenges, she can feed herself – and the world – with nutritious food made with protein and vitamin rich crops that grow well in the region. However, the path to get there must prioritize gender equality in agri-food systems. And, while gender equality is about women and men, women face hunger and poverty disproportionately. African women represent half of the labor force in agriculture. However, their time, energy, and productivity are under-counted and under-valued, and this is hindering sustainable development.

Zero hunger can be achieved, while supporting sustainable development goals and the 2030 agenda, by closing the gender gap in postharvest processing and investing in women as food entrepreneurs.

To date, minimal efforts have been made to invest in women as rightful leaders in food production, processing, preparation – and the statistics prove this:

Rural women spend a sizeable part of the day processing, collecting water and fuel for meals, cooking, serving, cleaning up, taking care of the family... and starting all over again each day. On average, they work more than men, especially since an inordinate amount of their time is taken up with care work.

They are less likely to own land. They also own less land and lower quality land. They have less access to irrigation and farming tools. They have limited access to information, technical support, and financial services. Women are less likely than men to own mobile phones, hindering their ability to get information and to be more formally active in agribusiness value chains.

The role of women in the postharvest food chain is severely under-estimated. In fact, most postharvest activities in Sub-Saharan Africa are not mechanized and are likely to be carried out by women. Women are processing their crops with rudimentary techniques and tools that have long been abandoned in wealthier economies. This includes grinding two rocks together to get paste, shelling by hand, or threshing with a mortar and pestle.

Women are working largely at the subsistence level and at informal, local markets. Additionally, they walk long distances to collect water and fuel and to process crops in instances where there are large motorized machines that pass through more established towns.

Much of food loss has to do with poor handling, drying, storage, and preservation due to lack of available technology and information. Until investment is made in supplying much needed tools and services to rural women, we will continue to lose anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of the much needed food.





So much time, energy and food are lost... and so is the potential for Africa to fully realize economic growth and to deepen her capacity to feed herself.

A focus on gender-smart solutions is a key strategy to increase yield, increase the supply base, and to reduce food losses. This means large-scale private investment flowing to support more innovation in the market, and more African women leaders in agribusiness. It means getting them off the mortar and pestle and investing in their roles as agro-dealers and fee-for-service providers with postharvest mechanization. It means eliminating drudgery for women and unlocking existing barriers to mobility, information, and credit. It also means targeted efforts to support women's groups to develop more organized activity and decision-making power for women in the market. These are necessary for creating business efficiency and growth. It means more information and communications technology (ICT) with real time info on market prices, postharvest processing tools and weather forecast, financial services, and more.

And, it means new business models for franchising in food technology promotion, equipment rental, fee-for-service processing and quality food product development in the rural sector where there is the greatest need for food as well as employment. Rural women as food entrepreneurs hold the key to increasing food security and reducing poverty sustainably. Investments in a portfolio of tools and services for agri-processing, and attention on specialized products, labeling, promotion, and developing strong branding will help in this endeavor.

At the policy level, there is some attention being given to the importance of women leaders in agribusiness and the need to eliminate drudgery in postharvest activity, but efforts to create an enabling environment are not strong enough. And, perhaps the vision isn't big enough in terms of what is truly possible. In one example, the African Union's commitment to abandon the hand hoe is truly bold and commendable. However, more robust activity in implementation must follow.

Insufficient private investment is the biggest barrier. There are major gaps in manufacturing and the distribution of tools and services targeted to smallholder agriculture. The private sector can do much more to jumpstart and support what it will really take to develop thriving locally-supported food markets and new leadership by women. 

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alexandra Spielloch is CEO of Bountifield International, based in St. Paul, Minnesota. The company is working to fill the gaps in Africa in postharvest markets, working with the private sector to get more tools and service packages into the smallholder market and to create new economic opportunity for women food entrepreneurs—profitable, sustainable solutions so that Africa can feed herself. She can be reached at [Alexandra@bountifield.org](mailto:Alexandra@bountifield.org).

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