Women predominate in the vegetable markets in Accra, but should men get more of a look in? Credit: IWMI

Two sides of the same coin: Balancing gender mainstreaming in urban agriculture

IWMI research in Ghana suggests that poor access to irrigation may discourage some women from taking up urban farming, but men also feel disadvantaged by female domination of the marketing sector.

You can't miss the vibrant patches of leafy greens as you drive around the streets and highways of Accra, Ghana's sprawling capital city. These are the plots of dozens of urban farmers who make their living from growing high value vegetables on patches of wasteland. It’s a risky business. Growers rarely have land rights and cannot be sure that they won’t be evicted from the land they have sown. Water supply is often unreliable and potentially polluted. But for the urban poor, a good crop can provide valuable income, benefitting both their pockets and the diets of other city folk.

In recent years policy makers have begun to take urban agriculture (UA) far more seriously. It is now widely recognised as a productive use of urban land and wastewater, and as a valuable means of poverty alleviation. But to date relatively little work has been done to find out if UA benefits men and women proportionately.

“We had noticed that most farmers were men,” says Lesley Hope, one of several IWMI researchers seeking to understand the issue. “Conversely most marketers of town grown vegetables were women. But we did not know why.”

To find out, Hope and her team surveyed households involved with urban agriculture in Accra, and conducted separate focus group discussions for men and women farmers.

The researchers confirmed that an astonishing 98% of vegetable retailers were women, whilst the gender imbalance was almost exactly the reverse for in-field farmers: only a low percentage of growers were women.

Could the study explain the difference?

In part, the researchers could show that the disparity is due to cultural factors. These are the roles that men and women have traditionally focussed on.

But one anomaly stood out. Most urban plots were irrigated using watering cans. This often involved repeatedly carrying two full cans from water sources to the fields. It is back breaking work. Where irrigation water was piped or furrowed, however, numbers of male and female farmers were more even. In the La area of the city, for instance, many more women are farming than on any other site. This is in part due to the labour-saving possibility of gravity-supported furrow-irrigation; a feature not found elsewhere.

“If we want to provide the opportunity for women to undertake urban vegetable production we need, among other things, to provide easier irrigation methods,” says Hope. “New innovations, like the increasing trend to lift and convey water by means of small pumps and hoses, offer opportunities for women. But they need to have the resources to pay their share when the local farmers’ group rents a pump.”

But what about the men? Should steps be taken to address the gender disparity in the sales sector? Many male urban farmers would like to get into marketing, since (as the data confirmed) sellers make more money than growers. Plus the work is less arduous. Men complain that they feel “oppressed” by the women who control this sector and on whom they regularly have to rely for credit.

“...This creates a complex problem for policy makers who might...”
wish to introduce gender mainstreaming into urban farming. Less labour intensive irrigation might tempt more Ghanaian women into urban farming. Credit: IWMI

Promoting new technology to encourage women farmers might help some take up the practice. Similarly policies designed to promote more equality “off farm” would have to allow more men into the marketing sector, something women would strongly protest against.

Gender mainstreaming in planning policy is usually regarded as a tool to creating a more level-playing field for marginalized women and men. Research undertaken by IWMI and others has helped to incorporate the principles of gender mainstreaming into the Accra Strategic Agenda for Urban and Peri-Urban Agriculture and its action plan.

This research suggests, however, that in urban agriculture at least, full gender mainstreaming might eventually disadvantage women. Smart, more culturally sensitive approaches to policy may be needed if policy makers want to ensure that benefits of UA are fairly shared. Equally important will be economic policies and incentives that will create a more open and freer marketing platform.


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