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The role of women in reducing postharvest loss

Women play critical agricultural roles in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in postharvest activities such as drying, storing, cleaning and processing food. Research indicates that postharvest losses most likely have important socio-cultural dimensions. Yet traditional loss reduction strategies typically focus on technological and economic solutions, ignoring social and gender issues.

Image by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

One of the greatest challenges we face today is feeding the world's growing population – expected to reach 9.8 billion by 2050 – while agriculture is increasingly threatened by the changing climate.

Most of the attention around this challenge focuses on improving production, yet reducing postharvest losses can increase food availability and improve farmer livelihoods without the need for additional productive resources. According to APHLIS, postharvest loss is a serious problem in sub-Saharan Africa, where up to 50 percent of crop production can be lost before produce reaches the consumer. With cereal losses alone having an estimated value of USD 4 billion per year, these losses threaten the food security and livelihoods of millions.

APHLIS postharvest loss estimates are available at www.aphlis.net

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Women are vitally important to rural economies. They rear poultry and small livestock, and grow food crops, making them responsible for 60 to 80 percent of food production in developing countries. Women also make decisions on how much food to store and how much to sell, based on their family consumption requirements, storage facilities, market price and the need for immediate cash. Women's prominence in agriculture can only increase in future, given the increasing trend of female-headed households in many regions. Nonetheless, efforts to improve agricultural sustainability – including the reduction of postharvest losses – tends to downplay the roles of women or to ignore them entirely.

Women and postharvest losses

This is certainly true at the policy level, where there have been efforts to stem postharvest losses since 1974, when the first World Food Conference identified the elimination of losses as part of the solution to world hunger. More recently, the Malabo Declaration on Agriculture and Postharvest Losses committed African Union Heads of State and Governments to cut the current levels of postharvest losses in half by 2025. Neither made explicit reference to the potential part that women might play in achieving these goals. The 1974 commitments were not met, nor does it appear that most African countries are on track to meet their postharvest loss reduction targets under the Malabo Declaration.

At the field level, efforts to reduce postharvest losses have tended to focus on technological solutions that women may not have the capacity or resources to utilize. Women tend to face greater difficulties than men in gaining productive resources and markets. They may lack access to credit and the information they need to carry out their tasks effectively. Extension services are critical for diffusing new technologies and good practices, but they often do not recognize that reaching female farmers requires a clear understanding of their specific needs and roles, their time constraints and the cultural acceptability of interacting with male extension agents.

A study of literature on postharvest losses in sub-Saharan Africa found that fewer than 1.5 percent of the documents reviewed (3 out of 213) explored gender issues, indicating that such issues are

woefully under-researched.¹ On a positive note, women's crucial contributions to agriculture, and the gender-specific constraints that limit their contributions to agricultural productivity, economic growth and food security are gaining increasing attention from science and policy.

Moving forward

Reducing postharvest losses calls for targeted investments and policies, which in turn requires understanding the causes and impacts of loss. Recognizing the social and gender-related aspects of postharvest loss will be particularly critical. A gender analysis of the food supply chain allows us to see the underlying causes of food losses from a broader perspective. This provides detailed knowledge of the postharvest activities that are dominated by men and those that are the province of women. It enables us to recognize differences between men and women in terms of access to resources and services, norms and values, and their voice and influence over decision-making in the food supply chain. Understanding where and by whom a postharvest loss-generating activity is managed could make the loss easier to address. If an activity identified as generating losses is mainly managed by women, for example, there could be gender-related causes that call for gender-sensitive solutions.

APHLIS provides estimates of postharvest losses, determining where loss occurs, and its causes and impacts, in order to guide the postharvest loss research agenda and help decision-makers to formulate policies and investments for postharvest loss programmes. While the success of these programmes must build on the best-available loss data – such as APHLIS can supply – it will also require keen attention to the diverse roles played by men and women in postharvest systems and the social and gender dimensions that precipitate loss.

¹ Affognon, H., Mutungi, C., Sanginga, P. & Borgemeister, C. (2015). Unpacking postharvest losses in sub-Saharan Africa: a meta-analysis. *World Development*, 66: 49-68. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2014.08.002.