



Dear Committee

RE: Inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative

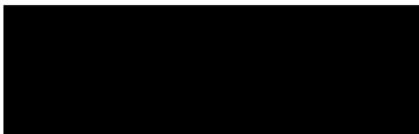
Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative.

The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) is Australia's specialist agricultural research-for-development agency. We invest in partnerships that generate practical research and innovations to improve agricultural productivity and sustainability, strengthen food and nutrition security, and build resilience and inclusive economic growth across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. In doing so, ACIAR contributes directly to Australia's national interests and foreign policy objectives through development cooperation that supports stability, prosperity, and stronger regional relationships.

This submission responds primarily to Terms of Reference 1 and 5. ACIAR's perspective is grounded in the central role of agriculture and food systems in regional stability and prosperity. Food insecurity, weak rural livelihoods, climate impacts, and uneven access to productive opportunities are all recognised risk multipliers for instability. Gender inequality in agriculture and rural economies compounds these risks by constraining productivity and incomes, weakening nutrition outcomes, and reducing the effectiveness and legitimacy of institutions and services. Conversely, gender equality strengthens resilience, productivity, and human capital – helping communities and institutions to manage shocks and reduce vulnerabilities.

ACIAR appreciates the Committee's consideration of this submission and would be pleased to provide further information or evidence if desired.

Yours sincerely



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Australian Government
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SUBMISSION

Inquiry into gender equality as a national security and economic security imperative

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Executive summary

Gender equality is a core development objective and a practical strategy for economic and national security – particularly in agrifood systems, where livelihoods, nutrition, resource governance, and climate vulnerability intersect.

Across low-income countries, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, women play pivotal roles in farming, fisheries, and food value chains, including post-harvest processing, (in)formal trade, and household nutrition. Yet women often face systemic barriers to owning land and accessing finance, inputs, training, decent work, technology, and decision-making. These constraints reduce productivity, weaken market participation, and limit household capacity to withstand shocks.

There exists a respectable body of evidence which indicates that closing gender gaps in agriculture can deliver large productivity and food security gains. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has estimated that equalising women's access to productive resources could increase yields on women's farms by 20% - 30%, and raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5% - 4%. Production improvements on this scale could mean an additional 100 - 150 million people meet minimum requirements for adequate nutrition. Such gains are directly relevant to economic security (jobs, incomes, price stability, trade, fiscal pressures) and national security (resilience, stability, and risk).

For Australia, integrating gender equality across foreign policy strengthens the effectiveness of development cooperation and complements diplomatic, economic, and security efforts. ACIAR works to Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy, and contributes through gender-responsive agricultural research-for-development that:

- increases productivity and incomes through inclusive innovation
- improves food and nutrition security by strengthening women's agency, access, and leadership in food systems
- builds climate resilience by ensuring women and men can adopt and benefit from adaptation technologies and services
- strengthens institutions and locally led decision-making for more legitimate and effective resource governance
- develops leadership and capability (including women's leadership) across partner-country research and policy institutions.

Key messages

ACIAR contributes to the Australian Government's efforts to advance gender equality and the human rights of women and girls, particularly in relation to Terms of Reference 1 and 5 of the inquiry. The key areas that ACIAR contributes are summarised below. They are supported in the literature and grounded in ACIAR project examples provided in the main text.

- **Gender equality underpins food and nutrition security, and builds human capital**
ACIAR-supported projects increasingly apply a nutrition-sensitive lens, recognising that productivity gains alone do not automatically translate into better nutrition. In this approach ACIAR recognises that women's agency and decision-making are often key mechanisms linking agriculture to nutrition improvements.
- **Gender equality is a resilience strategy in a changing climate**

ACIAR programs recognise that when women and men can both access technology, information, and influence in an agricultural and fisheries context, climate adaptation is faster, fairer, and more effective.

- **Gender equality improves social cohesion, governance, and stability**

ACIAR projects aim to improve women's participation in producer organisations, value chain governance, and community decision-making. This is more likely to address and improve the challenges around resource access, market power, and service delivery, while strengthening trust and cooperation, and improving social cohesion.

- **Delivering gender-responsive development outcomes through applied research**

ACIAR implements gender-responsive research which helps ensure innovations are relevant, adoptable, and equitable for different groups and across households. This helps ensure practical innovations that improve food production and incomes without reinforcing unequal norms.

- **Strengthening partner-country capability and leadership (including women's leadership)**

ACIAR helps partner organisations expand their talent pool and improve institutional performance – strengthening locally led research, extension and policy capability that is essential for sustained, inclusive agricultural transformation.

- **Supporting locally led decision-making and inclusive institutions**

ACIAR encourages projects that incorporate locally led governance, and strengthens the capacity of national agencies to design programs that respond to community priorities and support women's leadership and embedding inclusive practice within government systems.

- **Contributing to multilateral and regional gender objectives through strategic partnerships**

ACIAR contributes to multilateral and regional gender objectives by investing in strategic partnerships, for example by encouraging systematic change across the global research portfolio of the 'Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research' (CGIAR), to strengthen the global evidence base and practice on gender equality in agrifood systems.

- **Building the evidence base for effective policy and programming**

ACIAR tests, demonstrates and documents the value of engaging women as champions to accelerate wider uptake of different adoption pathways for climate-smart practices. With partnerships extending to national research institutes, ACIAR can provide robust, real-world evidence about the enabling conditions required for equitable impact.

1. About ACIAR and purpose of this submission

ACIAR is Australia's specialist international agricultural research-for-development agency. ACIAR is mandated to work with partners to generate knowledge and technologies that underpin improvements in agricultural productivity, sustainability and food systems resilience, delivered through research partnerships for the benefit of partner countries and Australia.

ACIAR's operating model integrates (1) evidence generation and locally appropriate innovations, (2) capacity development through training, mentoring and networks, and (3) partnerships and platforms that enable adoption and scaling. These long-term relationships, often spanning decades, are particularly important for supporting steady progress on gender equity.

This submission focuses on ACIAR's providing an agrifood systems lens on why gender equality matters for economic security and national security, and describing how ACIAR contributes to the Australian Government's efforts to advance gender equality and the human rights of women and girls. The below responds primarily to Terms of Reference 1 and 5 of the inquiry: (1) the economic security and national security benefits of realising gender equality for every person, and how the integration of gender equality across foreign policy supports this objective, and (5) the Australian Government's efforts to advance gender equality and the human rights of women and girls across foreign policy, defence and national security.

2. Term of reference 1: The economic security and national security benefits of realising gender equality for every person, and how the integration of gender equality across foreign policy supports this objective

Gender equality in agriculture is not only a matter of rights and fairness – it is a practical strategy for strengthening economic security, food security and social stability. Across many low- and middle-income countries, rural women are central to farming and food systems, as producers, workers, processors, traders and household food managers, yet they face persistent barriers to land, finance, training, technology and markets. These constraints are often reinforced by discriminatory norms and legal or institutional settings, limiting women's productivity, earnings and decision-making authority, even where women contribute a large share of agricultural labour.

The economic costs of this inequality are substantial, and the potential gains from closing gender gaps are equally clear. FAO analyses have long highlighted that if women farmers had the same access to productive resources as men, yields could rise by around 20% to 30% and national agricultural output in developing countries could increase by roughly 2.5% to 4%, with major implications for hunger reduction globally. Women's economic empowerment also generates strong "multiplier effects" because women tend to allocate a higher share of income to household wellbeing (i.e. food, health care and children's education), compared with men. In other words, closing gender gaps boosts productivity and incomes at farm level, and translates those gains into stronger long-term human capital outcomes and more resilient local economies.

This matters for national security and stability because food insecurity and livelihood stress are well-established risk multipliers. Where households cannot reliably access food and income, communities become more vulnerable to shocks (climate, price spikes, disasters), and social cohesion can weaken. Conversely, women's empowerment in food systems is consistently associated with improved food security and nutrition outcomes, and with more resilient and sustainable food systems – these are the foundations for mitigating the risks that climate or civil shocks cascade into instability.

ACIAR's contribution is to generate, adapt and test innovations so that women and men can both benefit, with the aim of improving overall productivity while ensuring social norms that limit equitable engagement in agricultural practice and decision making are addressed. This is not a "women-only" approach, rather, it focuses on changing the constraints that prevent households and systems from performing efficiently and fairly.

2.1 Gender equality underpins food and nutrition security, and builds human capital

Economic security and national security both depend on human capital (i.e. health, education and productive capabilities). Food and nutrition security are foundational inputs to human capital formation. Women frequently play central roles in household nutrition decisions and food preparation, and in producing and trading diverse foods. In the literature, the causal links between

women's empowerment and children's diets and nutrition outcomes are clear. However, when women have less control over productive assets, income, and decision-making, households may have less capacity to secure diverse and nutritious diets, particularly during lean seasons or shocks.

Gender equality strengthens nutrition outcomes through multiple pathways (1) increased and more reliable household food production and income, (2) greater diversification of production and diets (including nutrient-dense foods), (3) more effective uptake of nutrition-sensitive innovations, and (4) improved household decision-making and allocation of resources.

ACIAR-supported projects increasingly apply a nutrition-sensitive lens, recognising that productivity gains alone do not automatically translate into better nutrition, and that women's agency and decision-making are often key mechanisms linking agriculture to nutrition improvements (*See Example 1*).

Example 1: ACIAR-IDRC 'Cultivating Africa's Future' (CultiAF)

ACIAR's Cultivating Africa's Future (CultiAF) program (2013–2023), delivered jointly with Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), shows how gender equality can directly strengthen household food and nutrition security. Across nine research projects in seven African countries (including Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Mozambique), CultiAF targeted improved productivity and reduced post-harvest losses while deliberately shifting the constraints that limit women's ability to produce, process, earn and feed their families well.

From the outset, projects were designed to enable women's participation and decision-making – through practical steps (such as scheduling training around women's care responsibilities) and more gender-transformative approaches (such as encouraging men and women to share tasks, business roles and choices about income use). This matters for nutrition because women are often central to food preparation and household diets, yet face unequal access to time, skills, technology, and markets.

CultiAF innovations strengthened food availability, safety and dietary quality by placing women at the centre of value chains for nutritious foods. In Uganda, a project supporting women small-fish processors introduced improved handling and solar tent drying, reducing spoilage and improving food safety for a widely consumed, affordable nutrient source. With higher-quality products and better market access, women increased income – supporting more reliable household food purchasing and diet diversity. In Kenya and Uganda, research on pre-cooked bean products reduced cooking time and fuel needs, easing women's unpaid labour burden while making a nutritious staple more convenient and accessible for families and local markets.

An independent review found that CultiAF initiatives helped build women's financial autonomy and socio-economic standing, with spillovers for children's wellbeing (including education and healthcare) and stronger community leadership by women. At household level, changes in gender relations also improved nutrition resilience: one Ugandan participant described the shift to joint enterprise as "a game changer... my husband and I now run the business amicably," linking better cooperation to steadier income and improved capacity to meet household needs.

2.2 Gender equality is a resilience strategy in a changing climate

Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of hazards that affect agriculture and fisheries: droughts, floods, heat stress, salinity intrusion, pest and disease pressures, and extreme weather events. These hazards interact with existing inequalities. Women often face challenges with fewer assets and lower savings to buffer shocks, reduced access to climate information and services, constraints on mobility and participation in training and disaster planning, and limited voice in local resource governance decisions (land, water, forests, fisheries).

If climate adaptation programs do not address these constraints, they risk widening inequalities and underdelivering on resilience objectives. Conversely, when women and men can both access technologies, finance, information, and decision-making, adaptation is faster, more equitable, and more effective (*see Example 2*).

From a national security perspective, resilience matters because it reduces the severity of crises that can trigger displacement, destabilise local economies, and place stress on institutions and services. Inclusive resilience strategies, those that explicitly address gender inequalities, help ensure adaptation investments reach those who are often most exposed and least resourced.

Example 2: PNG Highlands – Gender-inclusive sweetpotato adaptation strengthens resilience and stability

In Papua New Guinea's Highlands, climate change is intensifying dry spells and increasing rainfall variability – conditions that hit staple crops hardest and can quickly translate into food insecurity, income shocks, and localised instability. Work supported through the Transforming Agriculture through Digitalisation and Entrepreneurship (TADEP), co-funded by ACIAR and DFAT, provides a practical example of how gender equality can be treated as a core resilience strategy, not an add-on.

The initiative supported farming households to stabilise sweetpotato production, an essential food and cash crop, by combining two complementary adaptation measures: clean (disease-free) planting material and small-scale irrigation solutions (e.g. water storage and distribution systems suited to smallholders). Together, these measures reduced the risk of crop failure during dry periods, improved the reliability of planting material after shocks, and helped households maintain food supply and market participation when conditions deteriorated.

Crucially, the approach explicitly enabled women's participation and benefit. In many Highlands communities, women provide most of the labour for planting, crop management, and food provisioning, yet can face constraints in accessing training and new technologies, and participating in decision-making. TADEP's gender-inclusive engagement, working with women farmers as visible adopters and leaders, and designing extension and support activities so women could participate, helped to ensure the adaptation investments reached those often most exposed to climate impacts and least resourced to buffer them.

The resilience dividend is two-fold: households become better able to withstand climate stress without resorting to harmful coping strategies, and communities reduce the severity of shocks that can drive hardship, displacement pressures, and strain on local services. This illustrates the broader lesson for climate adaptation programming – when women and men can both access technology, information, and influence, adaptation is faster, fairer, and more effective.

2.3 Gender equality improves social cohesion, governance, and stability

Gender equality can strengthen social cohesion, governance and stability through multiple institutional pathways. It supports more inclusive local institutions, which are better able to identify risks and respond to community needs. It also promotes more transparent and equitable decision-making, helping to reduce grievances and lower the risk of conflict. More equitable participation of women and men can further enhance the legitimacy of resource governance, particularly in contexts where land, water, and fisheries are contested.

These pathways align with the logic underpinning Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security: gender equality is closely associated with peace and stability, and gender inequality can be a predictor of conflict risk.

In agrifood systems, governance challenges often centre on resource access, market power and service delivery. Improving women's participation in producer organisations, value chain governance, and community decision-making can improve the quality and fairness of these systems – strengthening trust and cooperation, and improving social cohesion (**See Example 3**).

Example 3: Papua New Guinea – Family Farm Teams (FFT)

In Papua New Guinea, ACIAR-supported research developed the Family Farm Teams (FFT) approach – a practical, whole-of-household training model that helps families run farming as a shared enterprise, with women and men as equal decision-makers. This is economically significant in a context where women often undertake most agricultural labour (commonly estimated at around 70%), yet have historically had limited influence over farm planning, marketing, and the use of income.

FFT strengthens household economic security by improving how families allocate labour, plan production, and manage money. The approach trains couples (and other family members) in joint goal setting, farm planning, and financial literacy, so that the “farm business” benefits from the skills and effort of all members – not just those traditionally recognised as decision-makers.

A key feature is the cascade model: more than 260 village community educators (165 women and 101 men) were trained, who then trained over 2,400 community members across five provinces. Evaluation evidence reported a marked improvement in gender equity and greater recognition of women's roles in farming, alongside tangible livelihood gains. Families described more coordinated work, more land cultivated, higher outputs, and increased market sales – translating into higher and more reliable incomes.

FFT also improves economic resilience by making women's work visible. When households map daily tasks, men often recognise women's heavy workloads and rebalance duties, freeing time for productive activities and enabling joint marketing and budgeting. With both partners engaged in decisions about earnings, spending is more closely aligned to household priorities. As one participant put it: “Before, it was just me making decisions about the income and work. Now, I consult my wife when I am faced with decisions regarding community and family request for support in finance and other resources”.

3. Term of reference 5: The Australian Government's efforts to advance gender equality and the human rights of women and girls across all aspects of foreign policy, defence and national security

Australia advances gender equality and the human rights of women and girls through a combination of diplomacy, development cooperation, multilateral engagement, and peace and security efforts. ACIAR contributes to this agenda through the delivery of practical, partner-led research-for-development that strengthens inclusive economic opportunity, resilience, and institutional capability in agrifood systems. Two whole-of-government frameworks are particularly relevant to ACIAR's contribution:

- *Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy* – which articulates how Australia will use the tools of foreign policy to advance gender equality and women's and girls' human rights, including through bilateral and regional relationships and development cooperation.
- *Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021–2031* – which provides a coordinated approach across government to advance WPS objectives and women's rights in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

These frameworks reinforce a common principle: advancing gender equality is not only a rights-based obligation, but also instrumental to achieving peace, stability, resilience, and prosperity. ACIAR contributes to these in five interrelated ways:

3.1 Delivering gender-responsive development outcomes through applied research

ACIAR's core mechanism is collaborative research that generates practical innovations in food systems – new technologies, improved practices, institutional models, and policy insights (**See Example 4**). By integrating gender analysis and inclusion strategies into research design, ACIAR helps ensure:

- innovations are relevant to women's and men's roles and constraints
- adoption pathways are realistic for different groups
- benefits (income, time savings, safety, nutrition) are equitably distributed
- unintended harms (for example, increased workloads for women) are identified and mitigated.

Example 4: Indonesia (Aceh) – Gender-responsive applied research improves livelihoods and food security

In Aceh, Indonesia, ACIAR-supported applied research on soil management and cropping systems demonstrates how integrating gender analysis into research design strengthens development outcomes. Over a sustained 16-year collaboration, the project team built trust with communities and worked with women as key partners in diagnosing constraints, testing practical innovations, and shaping adoption pathways. This long-term engagement enabled the research to respond to the realities of women's roles in smallholder production and household food provision, while also addressing barriers that often limit women's access to training and decision-making.

A signature innovation was the expansion of dry season cropping and improved fertiliser management, including the promotion of vegetable production in household gardens managed by women. These gardens generated direct nutrition benefits (i.e. more diverse and reliable food for families) while also creating a marketable surplus. For many participants, the combination of skills, productive inputs and market engagement increased women's confidence and financial agency, and strengthened their influence over household financial decisions. Some women leveraged these gains to develop small, women-led agribusiness activities.

This example illustrates how gender-responsive research helps ensure innovations are relevant and adoptable for different groups, and that benefits are more equitably distributed across households. It also shows the importance of deliberately identifying and addressing gendered constraints early – so practical innovations improve food production and incomes without reinforcing unequal norms. The Aceh experience underscores that sustained partnerships and trust-building are often essential for inclusive adoption and durable, gender-equal outcomes.

3.2 Strengthening partner-country capability and leadership (including women's leadership)

Sustainable change depends on local capability of researchers, extension systems, producer organisations, and policy institutions. ACIAR invests in strengthening these systems through training, mentoring, joint analysis, and leadership development opportunities. Supporting women's leadership in research, extension, agribusiness and resource governance expands the talent pool and improves institutional performance (See **Example 5**).

Example 5: Strengthening partner-country capability and women's leadership through the Meryl Williams Fellowship

The ACIAR Meryl Williams Fellowship (MWF) was established in 2020 to help address persistent gender gaps in agricultural R&D – particularly the under-representation of women in senior technical roles, decision-making positions and institutional leadership. The MWF builds a cohort of emerging women leaders across the Indo-Pacific, strengthening their leadership and management skills, confidence, and professional networks so they can influence how agricultural research, extension and development programs are planned and delivered.

The inaugural MWF cohort brought together 20 mid-career women from Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, Laos, Papua New Guinea and Vietnam. Over a structured 15-month program, Fellows combined workshops, mentoring from experienced leaders, and peer learning with applied projects grounded in real workplace and community challenges. This model ensures learning is not abstract – it strengthens the participant's ability to diagnose institutional constraints, lead teams, manage partnerships, and translate technical evidence into decisions and practice.

Reported outcomes highlight how leadership development can shift systems, not just individuals. Alumni have progressed into higher-responsibility roles and become active change agents, for example, by mentoring younger women, establishing professional networks, and promoting more gender-inclusive approaches within their organisations and projects. In this way, the fellowship is supporting an increasingly active pipeline of future women leaders across partner-country institutions.

By investing in women's leadership alongside broader capacity development, ACIAR helps partner organisations expand their talent pool and improve institutional performance – strengthening locally led research, extension and policy capability that is essential for sustained, inclusive agricultural transformation.

3.3 Supporting locally led decision-making and inclusive institutions

Many ACIAR projects build or strengthen local platforms (e.g. farmer groups, community facilitators, innovation hubs, and policy dialogues) where women's participation and voice are intentionally supported. This improves the quality and legitimacy of decisions, and helps embed inclusive practice beyond a single project cycle (*See Example 6*).

Example 6: Solomon Islands & Timor-Leste – Inclusive community fisheries management

ACIAR's fisheries work in Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste illustrates how locally led platforms can be strengthened when women's participation and voice are intentionally supported – moving beyond “consultation” to shared decision-making. In coastal villages, women are often central to fisheries value chains through gleaning, processing, trading and household nutrition decisions, yet their roles can be overlooked in formal resource governance. The project approach responds by creating and/or strengthening practical local platforms, such as community fisheries committees, women's livelihood groups, and market or processing co-operatives, where women and men jointly identify priorities, test solutions, and agree local rules for sustainable use.

These platforms make decisions more legitimate because they reflect the full set of resource users and livelihood actors, not only fishers who go to sea. Women's groups are engaged in co-designing livelihood innovations (e.g. improved fish handling and processing, collective marketing arrangements, or small-scale aquaculture trials) and then feeding evidence and preferences into community fisheries development plans. By building facilitation skills and leadership confidence, women are better able to negotiate rules, monitor compliance, and help determine how benefits are shared across households and social groups.

Crucially, this locally led governance is linked to more inclusive institutions beyond the village. The work strengthens national fisheries agencies' capacity to design programs that respond to community priorities and support women's leadership – helping embed inclusive practice within government systems, rather than relying on a single project cycle.

3.4 Contributing to multilateral and regional gender objectives through strategic partnerships

ACIAR supports and collaborates with multilateral agricultural research and development partners, including global research platforms and institutions. For example, ACIAR has supported international efforts to strengthen gender research and impact in agrifood systems, including support for CGIAR gender initiatives and associated research translation efforts (*See Example 7*). Such investments amplify Australia's contribution to global public goods and support international norm-setting and evidence generation.

Example 7: Amplifying Australia's multilateral impact through CGIAR Gender partnerships

ACIAR contributes to multilateral and regional gender objectives by investing in strategic partnerships that strengthen the global evidence base on gender equality in agrifood systems and accelerate its translation into practice. A flagship example is ACIAR's support for the CGIAR GENDER (Generating Evidence and New Directions for Equitable Results) Impact Platform – a cross-cutting centre of excellence that helps integrate gender analysis across CGIAR research. The aim is to ensure that agricultural innovation responds to women's and men's different roles, constraints and opportunities.

By supporting a dedicated platform for gender expertise, ACIAR helps drive more systematic change across CGIAR's global research portfolio, which supports international norm-setting on what "gender-responsive" research looks like in practice (from research design to uptake pathways and impact measurement). ACIAR has been a key supporter of the CGIAR GENDER Platform, reinforcing CGIAR's commitment to mainstreaming gender and social inclusion across programs and positioning Australia as a constructive, solutions-focused partner in global agricultural research.

In tandem, ACIAR backed the CGIAR HER+ (Harnessing Equality for Resilience in the Agrifood System) initiative – an emerging, research-for-impact effort that places gender equity at the centre of climate-resilient agriculture. ACIAR support to this initiative has helped enable work that examines how adaptation technologies, institutions and policy choices can strengthen resilience while avoiding "gender-neutral" approaches that inadvertently widen gender gaps. HER+ also supports research translation by identifying practical options that reduce women's labour burdens and expand women's influence in resource governance and decision-making.

Together, these investments demonstrate how Australia's development cooperation can generate global public goods, including evidence, methods, and lessons that can be adapted across countries, while reinforcing shared international objectives on gender equality, climate resilience, and inclusive food systems.

3.5 Building the evidence base for effective policy and programming

Policy-relevant evidence is central to government efforts across foreign policy, development, and security. ACIAR's comparative advantage is generating high-quality, field-tested evidence about what works in complex rural environments (e.g. how technologies are adopted, how institutions can change, and what enabling conditions are required for inclusive benefits). This evidence can inform partner-country policy, donor programming, and Australian Government decision-making (*See Example 8*).

Example 8: South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Nepal) – Field-tested evidence on what enables inclusive agricultural innovation

In the Eastern Gangetic Plains of Bangladesh, India and Nepal, home to more than 90 million rural poor, ACIAR's Sustainable and Resilient Farming Systems Intensification (SRFSI) project generated practical, policy-relevant evidence on what it takes to deliver inclusive benefits from agricultural innovation at scale. From the outset, SRFSI treated gender equality not as an “add-on” but as a testable design feature: the project set clear participation targets (at least one-third of farmers reached to be women) and deliberately structured delivery mechanisms so women could access training, technology and emerging market opportunities.

A standout lesson came from SRFSI's support to women's self-help groups to establish enterprises producing rice seedlings for mechanical transplanting. In contexts where women's farming knowledge is substantial but access to extension and commercial pathways is constrained, SRFSI showed that linking technology change (mechanised transplanting and improved nursery management) with an enabling institutional model (women's groups, tailored training and mentoring) can shift adoption from “use” to “ownership” of innovation. Women participants reported respectable improvements in their incomes and improved standing in their communities – evidence that inclusive innovation can generate both productivity and empowerment outcomes when barriers to participation are actively addressed.

Beyond enterprises, SRFSI tested and documented adoption pathways for climate-smart practices, including reduced tillage, crop rotation and efficient water management, and demonstrated the value of engaging women as champions to accelerate wider uptake. With partnerships spanning national research institutes and NGOs, SRFSI reached large numbers of farmers (including more than 70,000 in West Bengal alone), providing robust, real-world evidence about the enabling conditions required for equitable impact.

Conclusion

Gender equality in agrifood systems is not simply a moral question – it is a practical investment in Australia's regional economic and security interests. When women can access land, finance, technologies, information and participate in decision-making, the evidence indicates that productivity rises, nutrition improves, and households are better able to withstand climate and market shocks. Enhanced capacity to successfully endure through shocks is a critical pathway to reducing the risk of livelihood stress advancing to instability and conflict.

Through long-term, partner-led agricultural-research-for-development, ACIAR helps to translate Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy into field-tested innovations, strong local institutions and women's leadership, and evidence that can inform policy and programming. Sustained, gender responsive cooperation in food systems therefore complements Australia's diplomatic and security efforts by building resilience, inclusive growth and trusted regional partnerships.

ACIAR would be happy to provide more information on these or other initiatives and to answer any questions the Committee may have.

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