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## PRESS RELEASE: COVID-19 AND WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

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As COVID-19 continues to spread in Africa, women in agriculture are struggling to cope not only with the restrictions to limit the spread of the disease but also with endemic inequalities, which undermine their capacity to respond and recover from the impact of this pandemic.

The pandemic is exacerbating already existing structural inequalities, increasing the burden on women as they struggle to fulfill their multiple roles of managing their families, farms, and small businesses. Furthermore, the gendered access to opportunities means that women and men have different resources available to them to prepare for, cope with, and recover from such a crisis.

Women constitute nearly 50% of agricultural workforce and own one third of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Africa, they are a key pillar of Africa's food systems. As the restrictions related to COVID-19 come into force in various countries, women's livelihoods and business activities are threatened, so is household food and nutrition, and family well-being, a key priority addressed by women's incomes. Their inability to freely access resources required to conduct primary production activities, find flexible financing to keep their SMEs afloat or earn wage income in rural markets will hinder food security and wellbeing of rural families.

AGRA, in consultation with continental partners or women agripreneur networks, calls on Governments in Africa, the development community, and the private sector, to urgently deploy resources to assist women access resources necessary to conduct agricultural activities, cushion their small businesses to avoid collapse and amplify their voices throughout this pandemic, to attract targeted support for recovery.

### **1) Providing avenues for continued access to inputs, mechanization, and advisory services**

With low saving capabilities, women small holders lack capital reserves to stockpile agricultural inputs, such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. Abrupt closures of input shops, lack of farm labour and machinery, fear and stigma associated with infections have led to farms being abandoned and farming operations disruptions. These primary agricultural production activities form the core of women's incomes, the loss of which is detrimental not only to food and nutrition, but healthcare, education and a chain of rural economies fueled by this income. It is therefore crucial to assist women access inputs, farm labour, mechanization and advisory services to help them weather the immediate effects of this crisis.

### **2) Facilitate off take activities to spur rural agricultural markets**

Agricultural markets are the lifeline of rural communities, and for women, proximity to local markets provide flexibility to combine home care with income generating activities. Disruptions to these local activities is akin to stifling women's incomes. It is crucial to keep local markets open, sanitize market infrastructure, provide protective attire for market operatives, and improve information flow to increase awareness and public alert. Transportation and logistics of agricultural products should be considered essential services since they provide offtake of agricultural commodities and nourish local economies.

### **3) Create women SME rescue fund and employ a swift disbursement system**

Women's agribusinesses are faced with existential threat, they are trapped in crippling cash flow crisis and liquidity challenges, resulting in disruptions to operations. From loss of sales revenue, cancellations of supply contracts, fear of spread of virus among workers, small women's businesses

are on the verge of collapse. Women SMEs are particularly vulnerable to these shocks due to their low level of capitalization resulting from limited access to long term financing.

Risk financing instruments such as insurance products and agricultural finance have very low uptake among women SMEs. It is crucial to rapidly deploy grants and flexible loan facilities to women's agribusinesses and employ swift disbursement system to offset this impending disaster.

#### **4) Deploy digital tools to access inputs, market products and access financing**

Digital services have provided a crucial lifeline for businesses, women business managers shared how they have used socio media to market their products while accessing information on production, weather and agronomic advisories, financing and accessing markets. Instruments such as e-voucher systems and online marketing tools have been handy in facilitating access to inputs and outlets for products. This is however not applied at scale and does not reach the most vulnerable women due to ownership of mobile technology and internet penetration.

Gender-inclusive digital services can facilitate rural supply chains and overall food security systems. Deploying ICT based capacity building at scale and increasing women entrepreneurs' participation in the digital economy through digital finance, digital marketing and digital trade such as [VALUE4HERConnect](#) are pivotal for a rapid response and recovery of women-led companies. Reinforcing partnerships with the private sector, to tailor mobile and money transfer services to the needs of women will be particularly important during this pandemic.

#### **5) Tailored training and capacity building to help women respond, recover, and build resilience amid the COVID-19 crisis**

With low literacy levels and limited networks, women's access to relevant information and support mechanisms is curtailed. Women's social networks and trusted messengers such as VBAs, women's groups and savings group leaders are useful channels to assist women understand and mitigate the impact of COVID-19. Technical assistance is crucial to educate women on navigating complexities caused by this pandemic, skills such as prudent management of businesses expenses, renegotiation of supply contracts, or accessing rapid financing for restoration of businesses are absolute necessity

#### **6) Bolster gender disaggregated data to aid response and recovery decisions**

Gender data is not readily available, making COVID-19 policy responses gender neutral and women's voices underrepresented. Gender data is crucial to enable stakeholder to decipher the differential impact of the pandemic on women and men, and tailor responses accordingly. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic must recognize and address gender differences in vulnerability and economic resilience and ensure that gender inequalities do not continue to be reinforced.

*Simultaneously, AGRA will conduct a survey of 1000 women agripreneurs and their responses to COVID.*

#### **About AGRA**

Established in 2006, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) is an African-led and Africa-based institution that puts smallholder farmers at the center of the continent's growing economy by transforming agriculture from a solitary struggle to survive into farming as a business that thrives. Together with our partners, we catalyse and sustain inclusive agriculture transformation to increase the incomes and improve food security for 30 million farming households in 11 African countries by 2021.



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