

Women's Involvement

A recent evaluation of village based advisors found that women in Sub-Saharan Africa, who make up about 40% of the agricultural workforce ([World Bank, 2018](#)), are more receptive to improving farming practices when the advice and training comes from other women. They are also more likely to pass along what they've learned to other women.

This brief explores this finding and others like it from recent evaluations of AGRA's Village Based Advisors (VBA) program, which included a particular focus on how the program addresses the unique needs of women farmers and VBAs.

VBA Evaluation Sources: 2022–2023

180 key stakeholder interviews, 35 focus groups with farmers, and 1,032 VBA phone survey respondents in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Mozambique

Farmer Evaluation Sources: 2023

6,777 farmers across 484 VBA and 369 non-VBA villages in Kenya, Mozambique and Nigeria

Background

AGRA is an African-led institution that promotes agricultural transformation across Sub-Saharan Africa. With the ratio of agricultural extension agents to farmers in this region often exceeding 1 to 1,000, few opportunities exist for smallholder farmers to learn better agricultural techniques.

To address this, AGRA's VBA program recruits and trains tens of thousands of respected farmers in best farming practices. These VBAs pass knowledge to other farmers and serve as

trusted problem solvers. VBAs are also encouraged to become agri-preneurs, connecting farmers with inputs and markets. AGRA and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation hired Mathematica to evaluate the program. This series of learning briefs explores key findings.

Findings

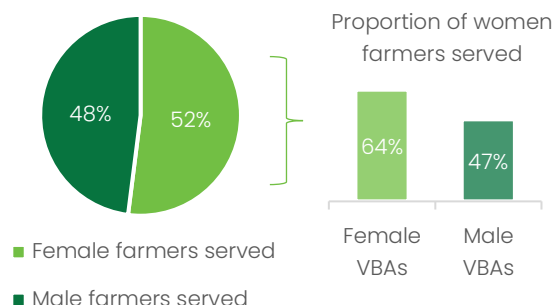
Long-standing social and cultural norms often inhibit recruitment and retention of women to the VBA program. This is true both for advisors and for the farmers they attempt to help, especially in Nigeria. Women face more demands on their time, such as caring for children, collecting water or gathering firewood. Further, lack of access to education can make it difficult for women to meet selection criteria, such as a requirement that VBAs speak, read and write in local and national languages.

Barriers for women also can vary by country. In parts of Tanzania, Nigeria and Burkina Faso, married women are often expected to receive permission from their husbands before participating in programs like the VBA program. Women in Burkina Faso are less likely to own smartphones, which VBAs sometimes use as training tools. Finally, the percentage of women working as farmers in Nigeria is far smaller than in Kenya and Mozambique, which may reduce the pool of potential recruits to be advisors or farmers.

The VBA program has different impacts on women than men. For example, women VBAs are often more likely to keep, rather than sell, their crops. In Mozambique, farmers report that women VBAs are often more transparent with money. Women VBAs who own

businesses, meanwhile, hire 16% more women than men do.

VBA contact with farmers by gender



Source: Mathematica VBA phone survey, 2022.

Women farmers do not always see the same benefits of participation in the VBA program as their male counterparts. For example, in Nigeria, women farmers earn less for their crops. Among VBAs themselves, men and women start businesses at roughly the same rate. But women are less likely to earn income from those activities. When they do, women make about 40% less. There are even differences in what appeals to those working as VBAs. Twice as many young men consider the opportunity to make more money the most important result of being an advisor. Women are twice as likely to cite increased harvests as the greatest benefit.

Opportunities

Farmers of both genders suggest the mere existence of the VBA program already encourages greater acceptance of a bigger role for women in farming.

“The northern people are beginning to realize that women can make a positive impact in agriculture if given the chance. So ... I would say, the program changed their perspective of women participation in agriculture,” a male VBA in Nigeria said.

For VBAs, AGRA could increase this momentum by working with religious and community leaders and by focusing more on crops and value chains traditionally dominated by women. (Care should be taken though not to limit women’s potential by focusing solely on lower-value crops.)

Some steps are underway. To avoid sensitivities in Burkina Faso around partnering women with men, the program sometimes creates husband-and-wife VBA teams. Where fewer women have access to smartphones, some program leaders rely more on in-person training rather than mobile apps.

In Nigeria, special training already encourages men to be more accepting of women farmers by highlighting the contribution women make to family incomes. Nigeria also sees more success recruiting women VBAs when female extension agents help with selection.

Conclusion

Greater participation by women in the VBA program would benefit everyone. Once involved, women VBAs perform as well—if not better—than men. But recruiting in many places, such as Nigeria, will require more explicit strategies designed to attract women. A good starting point is to focus even more intently on recruiting more female advisors as they are far more likely to draw more female farmers into the program.

To be replaced
by AGRA

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