



Raising voices

Empowering female farmers in drug crop cultivation areas

Published by

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

**OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS**

Published by:
Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

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Sector project "Sustainable Rural Areas"

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Design/layout, etc.:
now [nau], kommunikative & visuelle gestaltung, Frankfurt am Main

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On behalf of the
German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

Bonn, 2019



Raising the voices of
female farmers in drug
crop cultivation areas:
empowering women to
contribute to a sustain-
able change in drug
policy

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Introduction

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As UN Secretary-General António Guterres has observed, women play an important role in ensuring the sustainability of rural households and communities, and improving their overall wellbeing. However, structural barriers and discriminatory social norms continue to constrain women's decision-making and economic powers in both private and public spheres.¹

This is particularly true for women living in drug crop cultivation areas. In addition to the socio-economic difficulties faced by rural women in general, women in these areas also have to cope with the consequences of the illicit drug economies. Their experiences remain largely untold.

As a result, drug policies and programmes often do too little to address these women's needs. They also fail to draw on their potentially useful knowledge and perspectives. Indeed, some programmes and policies even tend to exacerbate gender-based stereotypes and inequalities.

¹ United Nations General Assembly (2017). Improvement of the situation of women and girls in rural areas. Report of the Secretary General. <https://undocs.org/en/A/72/207>

» Bridging the gap: bringing together women from drug crop cultivation areas

To gain a better understanding of the situation women are facing in areas of drug crop cultivation, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), joined forces with the Global Drug Policy Program of the Open Society Foundations and brought together a number of women farmers in an inter-regional meeting for the first time. Participants from Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico and Peru, as well as experts on development-oriented drug policies and programmes from Afghanistan and Thailand, discussed their views and experiences.

The purpose of this issue brief is to draw attention to the realities faced by women in an attempt to ensure that the formulation of policy recommendations and the design of programmes better address the needs of affected communities in drug crop cultivation areas, and make better use of their knowledge and capacities. At the same time, it aims to foster a discussion on the prerequisites of, and necessary adjustments to drug policies, in order to encourage support for human development.



The reality for women in drug crop cultivation areas

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At the meeting, the female participants shared their experiences and personal stories. They face similar challenges in different countries.

Women living in drug crop cultivation areas are confronted with adverse conditions. Their living environments are often marked by multidimensional poverty and they have to cope with the presence of armed groups and conflicts, which results in a high level of personal insecurity. They encounter numerous social and economic challenges, often due to traditional gender stereotypes that impede equitable access to opportunities, resources and services. In these contexts, women experience a different set of realities than men.

While many of the inequalities they experience differ little from those affecting other rural women, the situation in drug crop producing areas is more serious. The women described their situation as a ‘triple burden’: being women, being peasants and facing the stigma of having to depend on an activity that is often, though not always, illegal.²

» The many unseen roles of rural women

Women living in rural areas, such as those who attended the meeting, carry out manifold tasks and activities. They participate in agricultural work, and at the same time take care of their households. This means looking after their children, preparing food for the family and farm workers, bringing meals to workplaces, cleaning and washing clothes, while also tending to live-stock, as well as food, coca and/or opium poppy crops. At the same time, many of the participants stated that they are members of social or political groups in their communities. These social activities are usually crucial to the proper functioning and well-being of their communities. Most of these activities are not remunerated.

Coca or opium poppy cultivation sometimes offers employment opportunities to rural women, enabling them to generate an income. In some cases, these crops are their only option for paid work, although they are generally paid less than their male co-workers.

Women tend to spend their earnings on activities, goods or services that ensure food security, generate well-being and support education for their families and communities. As such, their economic activities have an immediate economic impact on their families.

» Lack of access to land and basic financial services limit economic opportunities

In areas of coca or opium poppy cultivation, currently few women own land or hold any land titles. For those who do, their plots are often too small even to provide for subsistence. There is a clear relationship between the limited access to land or alternative economic activities, and the involvement in illicit drug crop cultivation. Land is an important asset, which can serve as financial security when accessing basic financial services and formal credit systems. Without any security, women are further excluded from potential economic development opportunities.



² In Bolivia and Peru, coca cultivation is sometimes legal, when destined for traditional use on the regulated domestic market.



However, some women at the meeting reported that the usually stable demand for coca and opium poppy sometimes helps women to access informal local credit systems. A common example of this is the credit granted by storeowners who provide goods against a commitment to pay later, once the next harvest has been sold. Unlike traditional banks, these businesses are often the only ones that provide credit to women.

Being able to access basic resources gives women economic autonomy and with it the freedom to make decisions. Becoming independent of the resources men bring into the household is often the only way to break out of cycles of domestic violence that some women are suffering from.

» Participation in social organisations and Alternative Development projects

Despite – or because of – their challenging living conditions, most of the women who attended the event actively try to promote the development of their communities and engage in social organisations. This may entail participation in Alternative Development (AD) programmes. Some of them convincingly expressed their interest in transitioning to legal income options.

Many of the women have been active in their communities from an early age and some are even influential community mobilisers. They have been involved in social and farming organisations and agrarian unions, and have encouraged the peaceful expression of public opinions. In some cases, the women had even held local political offices, as deputy mayors and peace judges, or had stood for election to municipal or provincial councils.

In contrast to men, social or political engagement can have a negative impact on women at a social, family or emotional level. The acceptance and support of partners or relatives cannot always

be taken for granted. One woman's relationship had broken up because of the amount of time she spent on community activities. Playing an active role in the community is still not seen as a women's role, but one for men. Single or childless women have even more barriers to surmount.

Despite all this, the women at the workshop underlined the fact that participating in community decisions and becoming leaders has contributed to their personal growth. It has given them new tools and knowledge for interacting with government entities and achieving important local goals such as building schools, improving sewer systems, and carrying out literacy programmes.

Among the women at the workshop, the degree of experience of participation in AD projects varied. In countries where women are generally less well organised, the level of involvement tended to be lower. The reasons given for women being unable to get involved included a lack of information and the fear of rejection by relatives and partners. Some programmes were said to have had obvious barriers to women's entry. These only targeted specific beneficiaries, such as landowners, who are usually men. Either women could only participate indirectly or they were automatically excluded.

In countries where women are better organised and where they are already active in political and community organisations, this is reflected in their level of social involvement. Often, the organisations or groups in which they participate are active contributors to development programmes and AD projects.

Overcoming inequalities: how to create effective and sustainable gender-sensitive drug policies and programmes in rural areas

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As the situations of men and women in drug crop cultivation areas differ, drug policies and programmes must specifically address gender-based needs in their design and implementation. The following recommendations are derived from the views and feedback of the participants at the inter-regional meeting of women farmers:

- Promote and strengthen female leadership and actively involve women in the design and implementation of alternative or rural development policies and programmes. It is important to recognise their capacities and the knowledge they have about their communities.
- Provide training on gender-sensitive development to institutions and staff responsible for drafting drug policies and designing and implementing drug programmes in drug crop producing areas. It is important to understand the ways in which unequal power relationships between men and women influence decision-making processes and affect the participation of men and women in the community.
- Recognise and bear in mind that women living in areas of drug crop cultivation usually earn incomes from these crops and depend on them. It is essential, therefore, that men and women benefit equally from development programmes.
- In the design and implementation of development-oriented drug policies and programmes, take women into consideration as individual agents, not just as family members. For example, conduct meetings/dialogues specifically with women and their organisations in order to understand their role in the community and in the cultivation of coca and opium poppy. These meetings can create a space where women can talk freely.
- Support women's access to, and control over land and land titles, as well as their access to formal credit. Equal access to productive resources and assets is usually a precondition for improved incomes for women. Holding such assets allows them to contribute to agricultural productivity and paves the way for their greater involvement in decision-making processes.
- Plan rural development programmes, including AD projects, with short, medium and long-term objectives, and with active community participation. In this way, it will be possible to meet women's most important immediate needs.
- Ensure that AD projects are designed in a conflict-sensitive manner and according to principles of non-interference and do-no-harm, to avoid putting (female) farmers at risk when participating.
- Promote and organise more exchange platforms for women farmers in drug crop cultivation areas. This will help women to voice their needs and challenges more effectively, and to share their strengths and knowledge.
- Document violent events in drug crop cultivation areas, and share information about them with the pertinent institutions. This will raise awareness and improve the security situation for women living in these areas.



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