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International Women's Day Conference 2025

"Empowering Women in Agriculture: Navigating Peace, Conflict, and Food Security"

Conference Report
and Recommendations



CENTRE FOR
WOMEN, PEACE
+ SECURITY

Firoz Lalji Institute
for Africa



Middle East
Centre

Department of
International
Development



ARAB INTERNATIONAL
WOMEN'S FORUM

المنتدى العربي الدولي للمرأة

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Empowering Women in Agriculture: Navigating Peace, Conflict, and Food Security

Context

The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the Arab International Women's Forum collaborated on the 2025 International Women's Day Conference, 'Empowering Women in Agriculture: Navigating Peace, Conflict and Food Security'. The conference was organised with LSE's Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa (FLIA), the Centre for Women, Peace and Security (WPS), the Department of International Development, and the Middle East Centre. The conference aimed to promote women-led innovation and advocacy in agriculture across Africa, address critical issues, and pave the way for sustainable development and peace. It brought together scholars, policymakers, agricultural practitioners, gender and climate justice advocates, and social entrepreneurs to generate in-depth discussions of intersecting issues with a focus on the future.

Across Africa, approximately 66 per cent of the labour force works in agriculture and the continent has one of the largest proportions of women working in the sector anywhere in the world ([FAO, 2023](#)). The agricultural landscape is changing rapidly across Africa with climate change presenting huge challenges not only to environments and economies, but to people's livelihoods, cultures, and identities ([Nyasimi & Huyer, 2017](#)). In the wake of accelerated environmental and social change, structural inequalities, gendered relations of power, and conflict continue to constrain women's full participation in agricultural activities. Despite these very real challenges, women are forging new pathways for agricultural innovation that address the critical issues of sustainability, inequality, and peace.

The conference highlighted the critical role of women in agriculture across Africa, and emphasised their contributions despite facing systemic barriers such as limited access to land, finance, and technology. Economic barriers also restrict women's market access, with logistical challenges and trade restrictions limiting their ability to scale their agribusinesses. The importance of indigenous knowledge and sustainable farming was highlighted, advocating for agroecology and policies that prioritise local adaptation over industrialised agricultural models. With women comprising the majority of the global agricultural workforce yet remaining structurally marginalised, discussions underscored the urgent need for gender-responsive policies, financial inclusion, recognition of indigenous knowledge, and land ownership reforms.

Climate change disproportionately affects women farmers. It exacerbates food insecurity, displacement, and economic instability, making investments in sustainable water management and climate-smart infrastructure essential ([Shrivastav & Dabla, 2025](#)). In conflict-affected regions, over 600 million women struggle with food scarcity and insecurity, necessitating conflict-sensitive agricultural policies and peace-building efforts ([UN, 2023](#)). The conference called for inclusive policymaking, ensuring women's voices are central in agricultural decision-making, and stressed the power of technology and entrepreneurship in overcoming traditional barriers. The discussions reinforced the need for holistic, locally driven solutions to empower women, strengthen food security, and drive sustainable development.

Welcome Keynotes



After welcome remarks by Sofija Spasenoska (Communications and Events Officer, the LSE Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa), Mrs Haifa Al Kaylani OBE (President & Founder, Arab International Women's Forum & Advisory Council Member, World Agriculture Forum) set the stage for the conference by acknowledging the indispensable role women play in global agriculture and the structural challenges limiting their potential. She highlighted the stark realities of food insecurity and water scarcity, which are severely impacting public health across many regions.

Her remarks were framed around key statistics that illustrate the dire situation and gendered disparities in agriculture in the MENA and Africa regions. This included the fact that 83 per cent of the MENA region is affected by water scarcity, posing major threats to agricultural sustainability.

"Agriculture accounts for one-third of global GDP, making it the most effective tool for increasing food security and reducing poverty." - Haifa Al Kaylani OBE

What comes as no surprise is that women contribute 53 per cent of global agricultural labour but remain systematically marginalised. However, although 75 per cent of women's income is derived from agriculture in Africa, women continue to face barriers in land ownership, financing, and technology. Closing the gender gap could increase agricultural productivity by 19 per cent.

To address these systemic barriers, Mrs Al Kaylani called for holistic, gender-responsive agricultural policies:

- Expanding women's access to finance and credit, ensuring they can invest in sustainable farming practices.
- Investing in sustainable water management solutions to combat the effects of climate change.
- Providing social protection measures to safeguard female farmers from economic and environmental shocks.
- Implementing vocational training, literacy programmes, and mobile banking initiatives to increase financial inclusion and digital literacy for women in agriculture.
- Increasing access to land and agricultural resources through land reform policies.
- Grant funding and subsidies for women entrepreneurs to scale their agribusiness ventures.

Mrs Al Kaylani concluded by emphasising that empowering women in agriculture is not just a gender issue but an economic and global necessity.



Dr Caroline Green (Manager, Centre for Women, Peace and Security, LSE) focused her speech on the intersection of conflict, food security, and gender disparities in agriculture. She drew attention to the alarming rise in the number of women living near conflict zones. She shared that in 2023, over 600 million women and girls lived in conflict-affected areas, which is a 41 per cent increase since 2014.

“Despite producing the majority of the world’s food, women in conflict zones often eat last and least due to gendered food distribution practices.” - Dr Caroline Green

Dr Green shared that women in conflict zones face disproportionate challenges, including:

- Displacement and loss of farmland leave many without a source of income.
- Insecurity and gender-based violence make agricultural work unsafe.
- Restricted access to resources, as war-torn areas often suffer from damaged infrastructure, broken supply chains, and economic instability.

However, she emphasised that women's resilience in agriculture remains a powerful force, but their full potential is hindered without targeted peace-building and policy interventions. As a way forward, Dr Green shared a list of policy recommendations that should be implemented to tackle these challenges:

- Integrating gender and conflict considerations into agricultural policies.
- Ensuring access to land and credit for displaced and conflict-affected women.
- Investing in peace-building efforts that create stable environments for women farmers.
- Strengthening food security programmes that account for gender disparities in food access.

Dr Green concluded by stressing that food security and gender equality are deeply linked to global peace efforts and must be addressed together.



Following the speeches by Haifa Al Kaylani OBE and Dr Caroline Green, the audience heard from Ndidi Okonkwo Nwuneli (President & CEO, ONE Campaign), who presented a bold strategy for transforming women's role in agriculture, outlining four key steps to unlocking their full potential. Nwuneli challenged the dominant narrative of Africa as a "hungry child" in need of aid.

"Africa has the potential to feed the world and should be seen as a leader in agricultural innovation rather than a victim of food insecurity."-Ndidi Okonkwo Nwuneli

Nwuneli argued that instead of framing African farmers as recipients of foreign aid, they should be seen as agents of change who need investment and partnerships based on mutual learning. She shared that there is untapped knowledge of indigenous African agricultural practices that can drive sustainable food production.



Nwuneli's policy recommendations resembled those of Mrs Al Kaylani and Dr Green, sharing that structural barriers must be removed to allow women to fully participate in agriculture by prioritising the following:

- Land ownership reforms are critical to enabling women to invest in and expand their farms.
- New financial policies must be developed to increase women's access to credit and investment capital.
- Improving their ability to invest in fertilisers and better farming equipment.
- Financing models should also account for logistics challenges, ensuring that women farmers can own transportation vehicles and move their products efficiently.

To fully integrate women into the global agricultural economy, market systems must evolve. Value addition should be prioritised to allow African agricultural products to be exported as finished goods, rather than just raw materials. Trade barriers, certification processes, and branding restrictions must be removed to help women farmers scale their businesses internationally. Creating opportunities for women to sell finished agricultural products in global markets would not only improve incomes but also reduce migration pressures.

Nwuneli emphasised that African governments must be held accountable for creating an enabling environment for women in agriculture. She shared that infrastructure investment is essential to ensure that rural women farmers have access to roads, energy, and transportation networks. Fairer financing models are needed to level the playing field. Strategic grant investments should be directed towards women-led agribusinesses and agricultural cooperatives.

She closed by stressing that transforming agriculture requires more than just increasing production, it requires rethinking food consumption and ensuring women's leadership in value-added agriculture. Nwuneli called for a shift from viewing women as victims of food insecurity to recognising them as key players in agricultural transformation.

Panel 1: Women in Agriculture

Chair:



PROFESSOR NAILA KABEER

Emeritus Professor, Department of International Development and International Inequalities Institute, LSE

Speakers:



SARAH EL BATTOUTY

UN Climate Change High-Level Champion, Entrepreneur, Climate Activist, Architect & Non-Resident Scholar at Middle East Institute



HASSAN HALAWY

CEO,
Elite Agritech Division



IMOGEN

BELLWOOD-HOWARD
Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies

The discussion on Women in Agriculture centred on the intersection of gender, agriculture, and sustainability. It explored the barriers women face in the agricultural sector, the innovative solutions emerging across regions, and the broader implications for development and climate action.

Professor Kabeer began by highlighting a key difference between Africa and the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region in terms of women's roles in agriculture. In many African countries, women constitute the majority of the agricultural workforce and are integral to food production and distribution. However, in MENA, agriculture is predominantly male-led, and societal restrictions significantly limit women's participation in the sector. This difference, she argued, shapes not only women's economic opportunities but also the broader agricultural landscape in both regions.

She introduced the concept of low-input agriculture, which refers to farming practices that rely on minimal external inputs such as synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. Given the current global push towards sustainability, she questioned whether this approach could serve as a viable model for balancing environmental conservation with food security.

Sarah El Battouty framed her discussion around the profound impact of climate change on women in agriculture, particularly in the context of extreme weather conditions. She explained that heat stress is a growing concern, affecting not only agricultural production but also human productivity. Women and girls, she noted, are among the most vulnerable groups in this crisis, as climate change exacerbates existing gender inequalities.

El Battouty concluded that the key lesson from her work is that women must be active participants in designing solutions. When given the opportunity, they bring valuable knowledge and creativity that result in sustainable, contextually appropriate innovations.

Imogen Bellwood-Howard provided a different perspective by focusing on women's roles in informal vegetable markets in West Africa. She explained that agricultural value chains in the region are highly gendered; men typically engage in farming, while women take on the role of marketers and traders. Interestingly, despite not being primary producers, women often earn more than men due to their dominance in agricultural markets.

She emphasised that these market systems are deeply embedded in social relationships and reciprocity networks. Women traders maintain strong ties with farmers, providing them with advice and financial support based on their extensive experience. Although they do not actively engage in farming, their knowledge of crops, seasonality, and market trends makes them key players in the agricultural ecosystem.

One of the most striking insights she shared was that women in these markets prioritise long-term livelihood security over short-term profit maximisation. Unlike formal economic models that emphasise competitive pricing and profit accumulation, these women focus on building trust-based networks that ensure stability and resilience.

However, despite their agency, women in informal agricultural markets face several challenges. Inadequate transport and storage facilities hinder market efficiency, and while women pay taxes, these contributions often do not translate into the infrastructure improvements they need, such as public toilets and secure market spaces. She stressed that supporting the informal sector is crucial to ensuring that women's economic contributions are recognised and strengthened.

Hassan Halawy's video was about the role of agriculture in ESG frameworks. It highlighted how sustainable agricultural practices can reduce transaction costs, making food production more efficient and accessible.

He acknowledged that small-scale farmers face significant barriers to accessing modern agricultural technology, which affects their productivity and profitability. Investment in climate-smart agriculture, such as precision farming and efficient irrigation, is essential to overcoming these barriers.

Halawy also touched on mobility challenges in agricultural supply chains. Echoing El Battouty's earlier points, he emphasised that limited transport infrastructure disproportionately affects smallholder farmers and women market traders. Without efficient transport networks, perishable goods often spoil before reaching consumers, leading to significant financial losses.

Audience Q&A

When asked about climate-smart technologies for food distribution, El Battouty noted that while innovation in waste reduction and irrigation is advancing, financial constraints remain a major barrier. She pointed out that many technological components are available but are not easily accessible to small-scale farmers due to high costs.

A question was raised about whether Egypt's Green Village model could be replicated in other countries. El Battouty confirmed that both Saudi Arabia and Morocco have expressed interest in adopting similar approaches, with adjustments made to fit their local contexts. On the topic of gender norms and agricultural supply chains, Bellwood-Howard explained that while patrilineal and matrilineal systems influence inheritance and property rights, they do not necessarily determine women's control over their earnings in informal markets. In many cases, women retain financial autonomy despite operating within patriarchal societies.

Another question focused on how to support informal agricultural markets. El Battouty reiterated the need for inclusive planning processes that allow local communities to play a central role in designing their economic and infrastructural systems. Imogen added that investment in infrastructure and financial support should prioritise the actual needs of women traders rather than imposing rigid formal structures.



Panel Key Takeaways

The panel discussion revealed that women in agriculture are not just contributors but key drivers of innovation and economic resilience.

Some important notes that ran throughout the discussions are:

- Climate change disproportionately affects women, making climate-smart infrastructure and policies essential for gender-inclusive agricultural development.
- Women play a crucial economic role in agriculture, especially in informal markets, but face systemic challenges such as poor infrastructure and limited access to capital.
- Community-led and women-driven solutions offer the most promising path towards sustainable agricultural development.



Panel 2: The Impact of Peace and Conflict on Food Security

Chair:



DR LOUISE ARIMATSU

Distinguished Policy Fellow, Centre for Women,
Peace and Security, LSE

Speakers:



PROFESSOR RYM AYADI

EMEA Founder and President,
Professor at the Bayes Business
School, City University of
London, Co-Founder of the Brain
Capital Alliance and of the Brain
Economy Hub



DR DINA ZAYED

Independent Strategist,
Researcher, and Policy
Advisor



CHARLOTTE BROWN

Researcher, LSE Firoz Lalji
Institute for Africa, PhD
Candidate, International
Development, LSE

This session explored the complex relationship between food security, gender inequality, and conflict in Africa. The panellists provided insights into the ways conflict exacerbates food insecurity and disproportionately affects women who play a critical but often overlooked role in agricultural production and food systems.

Charlotte Brown focused on the role of women in conflict-affected food systems, with a particular emphasis on displaced populations. She highlighted Uganda, which hosts 1.7 million refugees, 78 per cent of whom are women and children. While Uganda's refugee policy is often praised for its inclusivity, providing refugees with land and access to services, Brown noted that the reality is far less equitable.

Refugee households are given small plots of land in remote areas, with minimal access to markets and job opportunities. Many women take on low-paid agricultural labour under exploitative conditions, reinforcing cycles of economic vulnerability. Also, high dependency ratios, where one individual must provide for multiple family members, make food security precarious.

Brown also addressed the social consequences of food insecurity. Women in displaced settings often eat last and eat the least. Malnutrition is common among pregnant and lactating women, impacting both maternal and child health. Many women, particularly in food-insecure households, face repression when they protest their conditions. One participant's quote captured the dire reality: "You can dodge bullets, but you can't dodge hunger." Brown argued that food security solutions in conflict-affected settings must go beyond humanitarian aid and advocated for gender-sensitive policies that prioritise women's agency in economic recovery.



Professor Rym Ayadi examined the economic disruptions caused by conflict in agricultural value chains. She explained that conflict inflates food prices, destroys infrastructure, and disrupts the flow of goods, making food less accessible and more expensive. Women—who often lack direct control over land and financial resources—are hit the hardest.

Using Ghana as an example, Ayadi illustrated how land ownership and land use are often disconnected. While women may farm land, they do not necessarily own it. This limits their ability to invest in sustainable agriculture or recover from economic shocks. In conflict settings, displacement exacerbates these challenges, stripping women of access to land, financial capital, and formal employment opportunities.

Ayadi also discussed the limitations of current policy responses. She noted that while some governments provide food aid, very few address the underlying economic inequalities that make women particularly vulnerable. She argued for gender-responsive economic policies, such as cash transfer programmes, which provide women with direct financial support, which will allow them to make decisions based on their specific needs.

Dr Dina Zayed contextualised food security within the broader global economic system, particularly the role of debt, climate change, and structural inequalities. She noted that many countries in the Global South are caught in a vicious cycle of debt, spending an estimated \$1.4 trillion on debt servicing. This diverts funds away from essential sectors such as health, education, and agriculture, deepening economic vulnerability.

Dr Dina Zayed contextualised food security within the broader global economic system, particularly the role of debt, climate change, and structural inequalities. She noted that many countries in the Global South are caught in a vicious cycle of debt, spending an estimated \$1.4 trillion on debt servicing. This diverts funds away from essential sectors such as health, education, and agriculture, deepening economic vulnerability.

Zayed provided the example of Egypt, where external debt has skyrocketed. Egypt imports 40 per cent of its food, including 30 per cent of its wheat, from Ukraine before the war. Despite widespread food insecurity, Egypt prioritises agricultural exports to service its debt, leaving domestic food needs unaddressed.

She further highlighted the intersection of gender, climate change, and economic instability. Climate shocks, such as rising sea levels and erratic weather patterns, disproportionately affect women in food-insecure settings. In many cases, women have fewer mobility options than men, making them more vulnerable to environmental degradation and resource scarcity. Zayed criticised the lack of gender-sensitive approaches in debt and economic reform policies. She argued that solutions to food insecurity must incorporate climate resilience, economic justice, and gender equity.



Audience Q&A

The Q&A session explored the concept of “creative destruction”. The idea is that while conflict is devastating, it has sometimes led to local innovations in food security. Some solutions have emerged through private-sector collaboration, raising the question of whether markets or philanthropic organisations should lead food security interventions. The panellists agreed that while markets can play a role, philanthropy and civil society are essential to ensuring equitable outcomes.

Dr Zayed posed a critical question: Who gets to be in the room when policies on food security are made? She argued that many food security policies are designed without input from those most affected, particularly women in conflict zones. Brown expanded on this, noting that scholarship on food security often excludes the voices of women farmers and food producers. The panel emphasised the importance of participatory decision-making in shaping policies that genuinely address food insecurity.

Brown also discussed alternative spaces of power and argued that while women may be excluded from formal policymaking, they play critical roles in informal governance structures within their communities. Recognising and strengthening these spaces is key to advancing gender equity in food security governance.

Panel Key Takeaways

- Women are at the heart of food security but remain structurally excluded. Policies must recognise their role and provide them with greater financial, land, and decision-making autonomy.
- Economic and structural inequalities, particularly around debt and land ownership, are major drivers of food insecurity. Addressing these barriers is crucial to creating sustainable solutions.
- Climate change is an escalating threat to food security, disproportionately impacting women in fragile contexts. Gender-sensitive climate adaptation strategies must be prioritised.
- Policymaking on food security must centre on the voices of those most affected. Participatory approaches that involve women farmers and food producers are essential.



Breakout Session 1: Policy and Advocacy for Women in Agriculture

Chair:



DR CAROLINE GREEN

Manager, Centre for Women,
Peace and Security, LSE

Speakers:



MINA KOZLUCA

PhD student, Department of
International
Development, LSE



MUNA ELTAHIR

Country Director,
Practical Action



NBUWAK PEACE YASHIM

Centre for Agroecology,
Water and Resilience,
Coventry University

Dr Caroline Green moderated the session on policy and advocacy for women in agriculture, which focused on how policies can advance women's rights and opportunities within the sector. The discussion emphasised the need for policy initiatives that combine sustainable development frameworks with the unique challenges women face in agriculture, particularly in conflict-affected regions.

Muna Eltahir discussed the challenges faced by women in Sudan, particularly access to land and the impact of conflict. The war has displaced many women, preventing them from cultivating their land. When women are able to farm, their husbands often control the produce, depriving them of any profit. She noted that weak bargaining power, limited access to markets, and the adverse effects of climate change, such as desertification and erratic weather patterns, exacerbate the vulnerabilities of women in agriculture.

"It is critical to move beyond discussions and act. Governments, development partners, and the private sector must prioritise inclusive policies, sustainable programmes, and strategic partnerships that ensure women farmers have the resources and opportunities they need to succeed". - Muna Eltahir

She advocated for the legal recognition of women's land ownership, expanding financial inclusion, and integrating climate-resistant farming practices. She emphasised the importance of creating ecosystems of support and partnerships to help women manage agricultural businesses and technologies, particularly in the face of climate challenges.

"We are fighting a long war for women to reach their full potential."- Muna Eltahir



Mina Kozluca focused on the situation of women working as wage labourers in the hazelnut supply chain in Turkey. Most hazelnut production occurs in smallholder farms, and the labour system often involves hiring migrant workers during the harvest. The work is seasonal, and women labourers bear the domestic responsibilities in addition to taking up waged work alongside the men.

Kozluca's research showed that since workers migrate as households, child labour is widespread, with children as young as eight working in the fields. Women, though central to agricultural work, are excluded from decision-making. She critiqued policies that focus on surface-level issues, arguing they fail to address the underlying complexities of women's labour in agriculture. She highlighted the precariousness of migrant workers and the hierarchical dynamics that affect women's participation in the agricultural value chain.

Nbuwak Yashim discussed the role of women in seed systems, particularly how industrialisation and the push for hybrid seeds marginalise women's traditional knowledge.

Women often control the seed systems in local communities, and their knowledge is critical to food security and resilience. However, the shift towards corporate-controlled hybrid seeds disempowers women because they cannot regenerate these seeds for future planting.

Yashim advocated for an agroecological approach that recognises indigenous knowledge and practices, emphasising the resilience of women who continue to experiment with open-pollinated seeds. She also highlighted how global policies often undermine women's power in the food system by neglecting local, traditional farming practices and by promoting systems that favour industrial agriculture.

All three speakers addressed the agency of women in agriculture but from different perspectives. Eltahir's discussion highlighted how conflict and climate change undermine women's autonomy over their land and agricultural resources. Kozluca, on the other hand, showcased how labour dynamics, where women are relegated to domestic roles, can undermine their agency in decision-making processes within agricultural communities. Yashim explored the specific ways in which industrialisation disempowers women by taking away their control over seed systems, which have historically been a site of power for them.



Conflict was a significant factor raised by Eltahir, particularly in Sudan, where war has displaced women from their land, further complicating their ability to access resources. Kozluca's focus on the migrant labour force in Turkey illustrates another aspect of displacement, where women from marginalised groups are relegated to low-paying, precarious work in agriculture. These two perspectives highlight how displacement intersects with women's roles in agriculture, rendering them vulnerable and often invisible in agricultural policies.

Both Eltahir and Yashim emphasised the importance of women's legal recognition of land ownership as a key to improving their access to financial resources. Eltahir pointed out that without land rights, women cannot access credit or invest in sustainable farming practices. Yashim added that when women's traditional knowledge of seed systems is recognised and integrated into policy, it can improve both women's livelihoods and broader food security.

Eltahir and Yashim both highlighted the challenges posed by climate change. Eltahir discussed how desertification and changing weather patterns make it difficult for women to invest in agriculture. Yashim focused on how women's deep knowledge of local ecosystems allows them to experiment with and adapt to climate change, particularly in seed systems. Both emphasised the need for climate-resistant practices that take into account the lived realities of women in agriculture.

Audience Q&A

The Q&A session delved into several critical issues raised during the panel, including Circular Production and Household Dynamics. There was a discussion of the tension between the household dynamics that structure agricultural labour (such as women's unpaid work in family farms) and the structural limitations imposed by the market economy. Social Capital and Its Role in Women's Empowerment: Yashim emphasised that social networks and capital are more important than access to formal financial systems for women in agriculture. Women's resilience is often rooted in their networks of support rather than institutional systems like social insurance or credit. Syrian Migrants and Gender Inequality: A question about the impact of Syrian migrants on agricultural labour in Turkey highlighted how gendered hierarchies in the agricultural workforce disadvantage women, particularly migrant women, who face multiple layers of exploitation.

Panel Key Takeaways

- There is a clear need for policy reforms that recognise women's rights to land ownership, financial inclusion, and decision-making power within agricultural communities. Legal frameworks must be tailored to address women's unique challenges, especially in conflict zones.
- Women's traditional knowledge, particularly around seed systems, plays a vital role in agricultural resilience. Policies should support women's expertise rather than undermine it by promoting industrialised agricultural systems that disempower them.
- The voices of women in agriculture need to be amplified in policy-making processes. Efforts should focus on including women in leadership and decision-making roles within agricultural communities to ensure that their needs are addressed comprehensively.
- Climate-resilient farming practices, such as drought-resistant seeds and agroecological methods, must be promoted to support women in agriculture. These practices should be integrated into policies that consider both women's agency and the impacts of climate change on their livelihoods.



Breakout Session 2:

Student Debate

"The widespread adoption of genetically modified crops is essential for achieving food security in Africa."

Proposing



ANNE CHIDEBEM OBA
MSc Economic History, LSE



ETSEOGHENA KHANOBA
MSc Health Policy, Planning and Financing, LSE

Opposing



PERAZIM SINGO
MSc Development Studies, LSE



IMANE SEKKAT
MSc Development Studies, LSE

Student Presentation by:



AMNA HAROON
MSc in Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship, LSE

Audience Engagement led by:



ZAINAB SANNI
MSc Media, Communication and Development, LSE

Expert Panel

"Harnessing Technology & Entrepreneurship for Women in African Agriculture"

Chair:



YOUSRA ABDELMONEIM
Senior Manager, PwC UK, working on providing assurance and consulting on Capital Projects and Infrastructure

Expert Speakers:



JOSEPH ADEYEMI
Director, Agrivine



DIONNE ABRAHAMS, CA
Senior Manager Operational Risk, Sahara Farms Ltd, Director, Barclays UK

The second Breakout Session began with a debate led by MSc students in the LSE Programme for African Leadership (PfAL), moderated by Zainab Sanni, a PfAL student and current student in the MSc Media, Communication and Development. The teams structured the debate to address the statement: “The widespread adoption of genetically modified crops is essential for achieving food security in Africa”.

Arguments posited by the proposing team included that genetically modified crops are a key short-term solution to immediate hunger and famine issues. The opposing side argued that genetically modified crops were harmful to long-term food security in Africa and negatively impacted the yield of farmers’ crops, and in turn their financial sustainability.



The next portion of the Breakout Session was a presentation from PfAL student Amna Haroon (LSE MSc Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship) focused on “Female Smallholder Farmers in Sudan”.

The presentation spotlighted the critical role of female smallholder farmers in Sudan and the complex, intersecting challenges they face. Despite playing a central role in the agricultural sector, where over 60 per cent of women are employed, female farmers are consistently marginalised, lacking access to land, finance, tools, and decision-making power.

Key challenges include:

- Social & Economic Exclusion: Limited land ownership, restricted access to credit, and poor market connectivity.
- Environmental Vulnerability: Reliance on rainfed agriculture leaves women acutely exposed to climate shocks.
- Technological Gaps: Outdated practices persist due to a lack of investment in rural infrastructure.
- Conflict Disruption: The ongoing war has devastated key farming regions, displacing families and limiting agricultural output, disproportionately impacting women.

Africorp International (ACI), a Sudanese social enterprise, is demonstrating what's possible when organisations invest in women. By supporting smallholder farmers with improved seeds, training, tools, and access to both local and international markets, ACI is enabling women to move from survival to sustainable growth.

ACI is building women-led cooperatives and supporting them to process and export hibiscus, traditionally seen as a labour-intensive crop. This programme has significantly increased incomes, reduced post-harvest losses and positioned women as key players in Sudan's agricultural economy. These cooperatives also function as savings groups, "money banks," and platforms for community-led development.

Female-led cooperatives have proven to be more reliable, more sustainable and more committed to reinvesting in their communities. But these women cannot succeed alone; we must scale what works.

Haroon shared this call to action: invest in women. Enact policies that protect their rights. Strengthen cooperatives. Embrace agritech. Support climate-smart solutions. Sudan's food system and rural economy won't recover without women, but it can thrive because of them.

Empowering female farmers is not only a moral obligation, it is a strategic pathway to food security, economic resilience, and post-conflict recovery.

The session concluded with an expert panel on "Harnessing Technology and Entrepreneurship for Women in African Agriculture". The panel discussed the opportunities for women in agriculture facilitated by innovative digital technologies. These include microfinancing through accessible digital cash transfer systems (Sahara Farms) and agricultural infrastructure powered by clean energy, such as solar-powered cold storage facilities (Agrivine). They also focused on the importance of agritech innovation informed by context and local experiences, especially community engagement to include women in the conversations effectively.



Panel 3: Moving Forward

Chair:



JOSEPHINE CHINAME

Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity, LSE

Speakers:



DAN COLLISON

CEO, Farm Africa



FUNKE MICHAELS

Author, Communications
Practitioner & Policy
Academy Fellow,
Newcastle University



MICHAELLE KUBWIMANA

Founder, Kawah Coffee &
Network Director,
Rwanda Business UK



OLUCHUKWU OKONKWO

PhD Student and
Researcher,
Collaborator, Sugarcrete

The final panel discussed the various layers of inequality that women in agriculture face, especially in East Africa. The importance of intersectional approaches are vital to address gender inequalities in agriculture. Policies need to recognise not only women's role in farming but also the broader socio-economic factors that contribute to their marginalisation. Chiname advocated for empowering women through education, knowledge-sharing and the creation of collaborative networks. Her insights into the intersectionality of gender, race and class in the agricultural space were pivotal in setting the stage for the discussion on overcoming barriers.

Dan Collison shared Farm Africa's long-standing work in East Africa, particularly with smallholder farmers. He outlined the challenges women face in agriculture, which can be grouped into four categories:

1. Climate change – Extreme weather events are affecting farmers' ability to maintain stable yields.
2. Land access – Women's lack of access to land is a significant barrier. Farm Africa has addressed this through family agreements in which male heads of households allocate land to their wives and daughters, enabling them to participate in agricultural cooperatives.
3. Security – Conflicts, such as the civil war in Tigre and violence in Eastern Congo, have displaced many women and subjected them to sexual violence. There are also issues in Kenya's fish sector, where women exchange fish for sex.
4. Agency and decision-making – Women's limited decision-making power in farming households remains a major challenge.

He highlighted that Farm Africa's approach is built on partnerships with the government and private sector to influence policies that benefit smallholder farmers, with a particular focus on creating a more inclusive agricultural economy.

Funke Michaels spoke about the power of narrative and communication in driving change for women in agriculture. She shared her experience in Maasai culture, where women traditionally have no access to assets such as cattle, but have found ways to challenge this by starting cooperative yoghurt businesses. She emphasised that the prosperity of women often threatens the status quo, leading to hostility and resistance from men. However, she noted the importance of community support, especially from women, and the need for strong narratives that uplift women's contributions to agriculture.

The panel agreed that it takes cooperation and progress-oriented women with support from men (like Dan Collison and many in the audience that day) to actualise these deliberations. The example of Maasai women appointing a spokesman to address the male elders in a forum, where women typically cannot attend, was mentioned which grasps the kind of help that the communities need to see more often.

Michaels also discussed how using communications effectively can shift the narrative around women's roles in agriculture, helping them claim their rightful space in the sector. She suggested that the existing narratives about women's power in agriculture can be amplified to create collective change.



Michaelle Kubwimana shared her experiences in the coffee industry. She focused on the challenges faced by women in getting Fairtrade and Organic certifications, which are essential for accessing international markets. The high costs of certification are a significant barrier for smallholder farmers. Kubwimana suggested that instead of focusing on certifications, policies should place equal value on the knowledge and experience of women farmers. This would reduce the burden of certification fees and open up opportunities for women to participate in global markets.

She also highlighted the social value of business. Supporting the education of farmers' children and investing in the community are integral to her business model. She emphasised that policies should recognise the social contributions of women-led businesses rather than focusing solely on formal certifications.



Oluchukwu Okonkwo discussed the development of Sugarcrete, a building material made from sugarcane waste. The project is particularly relevant to women in agriculture, as it provides a sustainable and affordable building material that utilises local agricultural waste. Okonkwo explained that women play a crucial role in proposing and advocating for economically viable solutions. However, she noted that one of the biggest challenges is navigating the legal and governmental barriers that hinder the adoption of sustainable building materials.

Okonkwo encouraged women to push for greater educational attainment and to take leadership roles in advocating for sustainable agricultural and construction practices. She also stressed the importance of collaboration between different sectors, including agriculture and construction, to drive meaningful change.

Across all speakers, the issue of women's limited agency and decision-making power in agriculture was a central theme. Collison discussed the importance of integrating women into decision-making processes within households and cooperatives, while Michaels emphasised the collective action and narrative-building required to shift power dynamics. Okonkwo's call for more women in leadership roles in sustainable agriculture and construction also underlined this theme. It is clear that enabling women to make decisions and have a voice in agricultural practices is critical for long-term empowerment. The lack of access to land and financial resources was highlighted by multiple speakers. Collison provided examples from Farm Africa's work with land access agreements, where male heads of households allocate land to their wives and daughters. This is crucial to enable women to participate in agricultural cooperatives. Kubwimana also discussed the financial barriers women face in accessing certifications, which limit their ability to access international markets. This theme reflects the systemic barriers that women face in gaining full participation in the agricultural economy.

Climate change was another key issue raised by Collison, who noted how unpredictable weather patterns are exacerbating the vulnerabilities of smallholder farmers, particularly women. Okonkwo's work with Sugarcrete also ties into this theme, as it provides an environmentally sustainable alternative for building materials that could reduce the carbon footprint of agricultural communities. Both the changing climate and the need for sustainable practices are critical areas where women's contributions are often overlooked but could be integral to finding lasting solutions.

Michaels emphasised the power of community-based action and narrative-building to empower women in agriculture. Her experiences in Maasai culture showed how women, despite societal restrictions, can create their own economic opportunities through cooperative efforts. This theme is echoed in Chiname's call for intersectional policies that support collective efforts and in Collison's emphasis on community-led initiatives in Farm Africa's work. The underlying message is that empowering women in agriculture requires not only structural changes but also cultural shifts that recognise the value of women's contributions.



Audience Q&A

The Q&A further highlighted other themes. The first was passing knowledge to younger generations: Michaels and other panellists emphasised the importance of educating younger generations on the value of agriculture. This education should focus on the economic, cultural and social importance of agriculture, with an emphasis on women's roles in the sector. The second theme was collaboration between Africa and the Caribbean: The panel discussed the potential for stronger collaborations between African and Caribbean agricultural sectors, which could benefit both regions. Sharing knowledge and experiences would help bridge the gap and create more opportunities for women in agriculture. There was a discussion about the tension between producing cash crops, like coffee and tea, and addressing local food insecurity. Speakers stressed that food security should be prioritised before focusing on export crops, ensuring that trade revenues are reinvested into local food systems. The final theme was the role of education and knowledge sharing. Okonkwo and others stressed the importance of education for young women in agriculture. They noted that empowering young women through education and skill-building is critical to breaking the cycle of poverty and enabling them to take leadership roles.

Panel Key Takeaways

- Policies that prioritise women's access to land, financial resources and decision-making power in agriculture are essential for long-term empowerment. Cultural narratives around women's contributions need to shift to better reflect their critical role in agriculture.
- Both community-based and cross-sector collaborations (with government, private sector and communities) are necessary to create sustainable and scalable solutions for women in agriculture.
- Supporting women in adopting climate-resilient practices, including sustainable building materials like Sugarcrete, is crucial for ensuring that women can continue to thrive in the face of environmental challenges.
- Educating the next generation of women in agriculture, as well as recognising their contributions, will help build a more inclusive and sustainable agricultural sector globally.



Closing Remarks

Professor Naila Kabeer provided the closing remarks and delivered a high-level analysis of the key themes and takeaways from the conference. She opened by quoting Albert Einstein, “The environment is everything that is not me,” which captured the essence of the discussions on the natural world. Throughout the conference, the interconnectedness of food, agriculture, culture, and infrastructure was highlighted. The importance of respecting and protecting the environment to ensure sustainable resources for future generations was emphasised. This theme underlined the urgency of addressing environmental challenges, particularly in the context of climate change, which disproportionately affects women in agriculture.

A significant focus was placed on localisation, with a move away from globalisation towards solutions that incorporate local knowledge and perspectives. The discussions made it clear that we need to listen to local communities, integrate their knowledge, and use local education systems to address the unique challenges they face. Education that works at the local level was emphasised as a key to achieving long-term, sustainable solutions that are appropriate for each community's specific needs.

The concept of scaling up through top-down and bottom-up approaches was also explored. There was a critical discussion on whether these models should exist in isolation or whether they could be merged to create a more effective scaling strategy. A hybrid model that combines both approaches, driving change from the grassroots level while engaging with institutional support at the top, was seen as crucial for achieving broader impact.

The discussions on financial models centred on the concept of values-based finance, with an emphasis on trust and reciprocity rather than profit maximisation. “Satisficing”, a term used to describe the idea of ensuring that communities and individuals have enough to thrive, rather than maximising profits at all costs, was a key point in the conversation. This model challenges the traditional focus on growth and proposes a more sustainable and equitable way forward for financial systems in development. Professor Kabeer noted that the discussions on financial models centred on the concept of values-based finance, with an emphasis on trust and reciprocity rather than profit maximisation. Satisficing was a key point in the conversation. This model challenges the traditional focus on growth and proposes a more sustainable and equitable way forward for financial systems in development.

The conference highlighted the need for respectful dialogue, acknowledging that disagreement is not an obstacle to progress. One of the significant points raised was how the reliance on aid has shaped development approaches and the need to shift towards self-reliance and alternative solutions. The importance of implementing wealth taxes was noted, with only three African countries having such taxes despite their wealth. The conference reflected on the need for greater self-reliance and more equitable distribution of resources, particularly in African countries.

A key focus was the necessity of the loss and damage fund, especially in the context of the impacts of climate change. Communities, particularly women in agriculture, are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. The need to create and sustain funds to support these communities was seen as essential, providing a safety net for those most affected by climate change and other environmental issues.

Summary of conference recommendations

1. Climate Resilience and Environmental Sustainability

- Prioritise climate-smart infrastructure and policies to support gender-inclusive agricultural development.
- Promote climate-resilient farming practices, such as drought-resistant seeds and agroecological methods, within policies that reflect women's agency and climate impacts on their livelihoods. Support women in adopting such practices, including sustainable building materials like Sugarcrete, to help them thrive despite environmental challenges.
- Invest in sustainable water management solutions to combat the effects of climate change.
- Prioritise gender-sensitive climate adaptation strategies, recognising that climate change disproportionately affects women in fragile contexts.

2. Land, Resources, and Legal Access

- Increase access to land and agricultural resources through land reform policies.
- Ensure access to land and credit for displaced and conflict-affected women.
- Prioritise women's access to land and financial resources, while shifting cultural narratives to reflect women's critical role in agriculture and beyond.
- Tailor legal frameworks to address women's unique challenges, especially in conflict zones.

3. Financial Inclusion and Economic Empowerment

- Implement vocational training, literacy programmes, and mobile banking initiatives to increase financial inclusion and digital literacy for women in agriculture.
- Offer grant funding and subsidies for women entrepreneurs to scale their agribusiness ventures.
- Develop new financial policies to increase women's access to credit and investment capital, ensuring they can invest in sustainable farming practices.
- Design financing models that account for logistics challenges, enabling women farmers to own transportation vehicles and move their products efficiently.

4. Gender Equality and Social Protection

- Provide social protection measures to safeguard female farmers from economic and environmental shocks.
- Integrate gender and conflict considerations into agricultural policies.
- Amplify the voices of women in agriculture in policy-making processes and include women in leadership and decision-making roles within agricultural communities.
- Use participatory approaches that involve women farmers and food producers to ensure that their needs are addressed comprehensively.
- Promote community-led and women-driven solutions as the most promising path towards sustainable agricultural development.

5. Knowledge, Education, and Traditional Practices

- Women's traditional knowledge, particularly around seed systems, plays a vital role in agricultural resilience, policies should support women's expertise.
- Educate the next generation of women in agriculture and recognise their contributions to build a more inclusive and sustainable global agricultural sector.

6. Peacebuilding, Security, and Food Access

- Invest in peace-building efforts that create stable environments for women farmers.
- Strengthen food security programmes that account for gender disparities in food access.
- Centre policymaking on food security around the voices of those most affected.
- Economic and structural inequalities, particularly around debt and land ownership, are major drivers of food insecurity. Addressing these barriers is crucial to creating sustainable solutions.

7. Cross-Sector and Community Collaboration

- Foster community-based and cross-sector collaborations (government, private sector, communities) to create sustainable and scalable solutions for women in agriculture.

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