

## Women Do Not Just Help, They Do: Lesson Learned from Women Cocoa Farmers in Indonesia

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*It was a hot Thursday afternoon. Among the greens of cocoa trees, a group of women and men farmers gathered around listening attentively to a talk about soil pH and pest control. “So now you know how to calculate soil pH and the effect it might give to your cocoa trees, right? Are there any questions, Pak<sup>1</sup>?” the lady facilitator asked. A man raised his hand, which started a discussion on the importance of controlling soil pH for the trees to produce good quality cocoa beans. Throughout the process, the women farmers were quiet and did not say much. They sat quietly in the back rows, overshadowed by the men. Is it because they were outnumbered by the men, or a sense of out of place was starting to take its tolls on them, is a question yet to be answered.*

Gender equality highly values equal participation and involvement of women and men in all different spheres of life. Women and men need to be involved in all stages of development from planning to implementation in order for them to be able to equally control and benefit from the development. The UN makes it clear that gender equality is about the availability of equal access and opportunities to both women and men; *it is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world*<sup>2</sup>. Being a group in the society that is often left behind and marginalized, women and girls are most of the time targeted as the primary focus. Empowering women and encouraging them to be more involved are believed to bring us closer to gender equality. Many policies and programs have started to set women’s minimum participation rate at 30% in various domains, from political representation in parliaments to women’s attendance in training and even in a small discussion of cocoa farmers in one hot Thursday afternoon. But what does it really mean to be present, or to participate? Has it really been contributing to women gaining more access to opportunities and control over resources?

After that encounter with the group of farmers, we continued to meet with women farmer groups<sup>3</sup>. These farmers have been receiving assistance and capacity building trainings from an international organization to improve the production and quality of their cocoa beans<sup>4</sup>. The women were, in majority, the wives of the men farmers. A few of them were helping their fathers manage their cocoa gardens. Being in a women-only environment where they feel more secure and comfortable, the women we met were more vibrant and full of energy. They shared their stories on how they are now more knowledgeable about cocoa and how the household income has doubled because of the good quality beans they produced. The families can even save money on hiring additional help because now women are more than capable to manage their cocoa gardens. Changes are also happening in the relationship between women and men in the family in which women are now consulted by their husbands in making decisions about their cocoa gardens and there are more discussions happening between the two than before.

These changes were surprisingly beyond expectation considering that women were only expected to join the training sessions when they had time as proxies for their husbands or fathers, and were mostly seen as helpers in the gardens. This in turn would affect the way

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Pak’ is the short of ‘Bapak’; a term Indonesians use to address adult men.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

<sup>3</sup> The trip was part of the author’s field visit to one of the locations of sustainable agriculture projects in Indonesia that she is currently working on.

<sup>4</sup> To know more please see: <http://www.swisscontact.org/en/country/indonesia/projects/projects-indonesia/project/-/show/sustainable-cocoa-production-program-scpp.html>

women were treated in the sessions where the facilitators would often center their focus only on the men farmers as heads of households and sole guardians of the land and gardens, leaving women largely in the back rows as second class farmers. The stereotyping has also proved to affect the way women view themselves. The documented data on daily time use and gendered division of labor in agricultural activities demonstrates women's fairly large share of the workload in the farms; however, when asked who contributed to the farms, women would immediately say it's their husbands. "I just help" is the phrase these women commonly use to describe their roles.

The issue of lack of acknowledgment of women's roles and contributions in agriculture, economy and other prominent development sectors has in fact never been fully resolved. Indonesia's related laws and regulations are still gender-blind and some even biased. To cite an example, Marriage Law No. 1/1974 still specifies men as the head of household and main provider for the family while women as a housewife. In fact, women make up 23% of total farmers in the agricultural sector (BPS<sup>5</sup>, 2013), and 55.04% of women of reproductive age take part in the Indonesian labor force<sup>6</sup>. The figures show that women are evidently there; however, the acknowledgment of women's presence may not be. No matter how hardworking women farmers are in managing their farms and plantations, they would only be seen as additional help. No matter how much contribution women make to the household economy, their share of income would only be seen as additional cash<sup>7</sup>. Women's tireless efforts to defy gender stereotypes are often met with dead ends, with many of them being still required to fulfill their role as the carer of the household, prioritizing over anything else. As a result, women's contribution as the family's provider and active agent of economic transformation has never been fully acknowledged.

If there's one thing we can learn here, it is the undeniable fact that when women take part in and actively contribute, positive changes happen. The government and society at large need to acknowledge this by giving more space for women to improve the magnitude of their presence. Programs need to track not only women's rate of participation with series of numbers and figures, but also qualitatively document women's contribution and roles in discussions and making constructive changes. Efforts need to be made to encourage women to participate more, from acknowledging their presence in meetings, arranging women-only training sessions, to holding activities that suit their time and availability. This way, women would feel their participation is not only required but also necessary. In time, hopefully the women cocoa farmers will finally have the confidence to sit in the front rows, and raise their hands with pride. They will have the courage to say out loud, "We don't just help; we do contribute and therefore deserve acknowledgment".

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<sup>5</sup> Badan Pusat Statistik (Indonesia National Statistics Office)

<sup>6</sup> As quoted by the Minister of Manpower of Indonesia in <http://bisnis.liputan6.com/read/2952105/menaker-kontribusi-perempuan-dalam-ekonomi-terus-meningkat>

<sup>7</sup> This is documented in the author's previous study on women's business in Indonesia in [http://www.mca-indonesia.go.id/en/publications/publication\\_types/crosscutting\\_activities\\_publication/study\\_on\\_the\\_development\\_of\\_a\\_formal\\_definition\\_of\\_women-owned\\_business\\_in\\_indonesia-721](http://www.mca-indonesia.go.id/en/publications/publication_types/crosscutting_activities_publication/study_on_the_development_of_a_formal_definition_of_women-owned_business_in_indonesia-721)

## The 27th Foreign Correspondent Report



Women cocoa farmers voicing up their concerns in a discussion session.